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## Reentry Services for Individuals Wrongfully Convicted and Exonerated

Karlene Patsy Blackman  
*Walden University*

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# Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences

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Karlene P. Blackman

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Walden University  
2021

Abstract

Reentry Services for Individuals Wrongfully Convicted and Exonerated

by

Karlene P Blackman

MS, Walden University, 2020

MS, University of Central Florida, 2016

BS, New York City Technical College, 2002

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Criminal Justice – Law & Public Policy

Walden University

November 2021

## Abstract

Despite research summarizing the causes of wrongful convictions, there are limited works on factors influencing exonerees' reintegration into society. Although reentry services are provided to ex-offenders, the problem is that reentry services are not provided to individuals who are wrongfully convicted and exonerated. This study used state harm as a theoretical foundation. The general qualitative study determined if support or reentry services, if any, would have enhanced or increased the chances of a successful transition into society for individuals wrongfully convicted and exonerated. Specifically, it was an investigation of how a lack of reentry services associated with life, employment, shelter, health, and connections with family and friends influenced their transition back into society. Semistructured face-to-face interviews were conducted with eight participants to explore factors influencing exonerees' successful reentry into society. Responses were recorded, analyzed, and then imported into NVivo for transcription, coding, and further analysis. The results showed that reentry with immediate shelter, healthcare, support service programs, employment, and identity papers would lessen the obstacles to transition into society. The findings suggest a need for reentry services and programs for individuals wrongfully convicted and exonerated. The positive social change implications are documentation of the effect a lack of reentry services has on successful reintegration. These findings could aid criminal justice administrators, politicians, and state governments to consider policies that include services to support reentry of individuals wrongfully convicted and exonerated.

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## Dedication

This research is dedicated to my family: Kiera L. Blackman, Kenya S. Blackman, and Ayinde G. Blackman and my grandchildren: Kadir Blackman, Mekhi Allong, and those that are to come. Through the challenges of my life, I was forged into becoming a strong black woman—many thanks and appreciation for seeing me through my process. I love you, and I encourage you to seek God first and put the other things in your life after him. If you put him first in everything you do, you will be blessed beyond measure. And the LORD declares, “For I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future” Jeremiah 29:11 (NIV). I have traveled a long, rough, and difficult path. Through it all, I have learned to trust in God. Here is the beginning of my purpose as a child of God. Victory is mine.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

The benefit of reentry services provided to ex-offenders reduces joblessness and lack of housing and can form law-abiding citizens through empowerment and cooperation from the community (Martin & Moore, 2018; Schlager, 2018). However, reentry services were only provided to ex-offenders and not to wrongfully convicted and exonerated individuals. Although the National Registry of Exoneration data showed that exoneration numbers have grown from 24 in 1989 to almost 174 by 2018 (Cabral, 2021), exonerees did not have access to reentry programs and state aid (Witness to Innocence, n.d.). Reentry programs were implemented to assist citizens who reentered society following their incarceration (Department of Justice Archives, 2017). Exonerees face challenges within their community as they are left without living resources and a social network in which to live (Gosling, 2016). According to Berghuis (2018), the government should support reentry programs for everyone formerly incarcerated. The wrongfully convicted and exonerated are especially in need of service due to their lengthy imprisonment.

The National Registry of Exonerations (2020) reported 9 years as the average prison stay for exonerees. The incarceration period excluded the jail time before conviction (National Registry of Exonerations, 2020). Despite the wrongful conviction of innocent individuals, most state governments in the United States do not offer specific reentry services for exonerees (Clow, 2017). Although exonerees and parolees have the same needs, exonerees are not eligible for parolees' limited benefits (Clow, 2017). Parolees have reentry programs, such as financial training, educational training,

psychological counseling, and addiction treatment upon reentering their communities (Department of Justice Archives, 2017). However, the wrongfully convicted and exonerated lack the resources or help needed to transition back into society and recover from the trauma of being wrongfully convicted and exonerated (Kukucka et al., 2020). This study's social implications are in aiding the development and implementation of programs that serve exonerees. In the study, I documented reentry challenges along the dimensions of the individual, the community, and the state for serving the wrongful convicted and exonerated.

In Chapter 1, I present an analysis of the general qualitative study and discuss the history of reentry support services in the United States. The problem statement explores the lack of government reentry support services for exonerees. I explain the purpose of the study, my intent for the study, and the phenomenon of interest. The research questions identify the central concept studied. I explain the theoretical framework and how it related to the study and research questions. I discuss the nature of the study with the methodology, design, and phenomenon researched. I explain critical definitions to terminologies, current assumptions related to the study, and it's the scope of the study. I further explore the delimitations and limitations of the methodology and study design. Finally, I discuss the study's significance related to the lack of support services for individuals wrongfully convicted and exonerated, which was to yield meaningful policy

### **Background**

The history of reentry is pertinent to understanding the process and significance of the study. The United States is a world leader in incarceration (Bureau of Justice

Statistics, n.d.). The United States Department of Justice estimated that nearly 95% of the 1.4 million prison inmates returned to communities (Bureau of Justice Statistics, n.d.). The overwhelming number of formerly incarcerated individuals contribute to people being released from prison at the system and policy levels. Reentry is the transition of offenders from prison to the community or community supervision (Petersilia, 2009). Most formerly incarcerated persons leave prison with little education or vocational skills and struggle with substance abuse, physical disabilities, and mental illness (Petersilia, 2009).

The definition of reentry in the study excluded individuals released from local jails. Included were persons released and discharged from state or federal prisons or state parole, federal parole, or federal supervised release (Bureau of Justice Statistics, n.d.). Parole was formed in the United States to reform offenders and return them to society (Schuman, 2019). Unlike parole release, probation release is determined by the court. Probation release does not involve imprisonment and is subject to the Department of Corrections (Bureau of Justice Statistics, n.d.). Although probation and parole are different, they share the sense of reentry by returning formerly incarcerated persons to the community. As prisoner release numbers continue to grow (Bureau of Justice Statistics, n.d.), prisoners struggle with building a new life in the community (American Psychological Association [APA], 2018). This challenge is faced by hundreds of thousands of people each year upon release from prisons (Bureau of Justice Statistics, n.d.).



To help exonerees effectively reintegrate into society, Scherr et al. (2018) discovered that willingness to support reintegration depends on how the community regarded the individual. Perception was significant in the reentry process, as shown by Clow (2017) who focused on employers' opinions on applicants with a criminal history. Clow (2017) found that a criminal record was a barrier to reintegration for formerly incarcerated individuals. Research has shown that a person's race was a determinant factor for reentry services. Howard (2019) compared Black exonerees to White exonerees and their postincarceration challenges. A Black exoneree was perceived as more aggressive but not less skilled and less deserving of services than a White exoneree through the qualitative study. Konvisser and Werry's (2017) exploratory research provided insights to understanding the psychological nature of people the justice system has injured. Shlosberg et al. (2012) examined the elements that cause exonerees to successfully reenter society and the expunging of their wrongful conviction offense. Findings from the research showed that the expungement of records was not immediate. Westervelt and Cook (2018) revealed that exonerees' crisis experience extended after release in feelings of abandonment, humiliation, and the lack of acceptance of their experiences.

Whether release came from exoneration, serving an entire sentence, or early conditional release through a parole board, a formerly incarcerated individual faces many problems. A successful transition is then lengthy because of the barriers (Christian & Walker, 2021). Although significant developments were available to identify and assist wrongfully convicted individuals in exoneration, few studies explored the obstacles of

reentry support services. The gap in knowledge this study addressed is that the wrongfully convicted and exonerated are left lacking the resources or help needed to transition back into society or recover from the trauma of being wrongfully convicted and exonerated (Kukucka et al., 2020). The study was needed to understand the postexoneration experiences and provide empirical research for politicians and criminal justice officials to impact policies that grant exonerees access to human service reentry programs and state aid. The policy reforms are necessary and meaningful to help exonerees become effective members of society (Scherr et al., 2018).

### **Problem Statement**

Although reentry services are provided to ex-offenders, the problem is that reentry services are not provided to individuals who are wrongfully convicted and exonerated. Reentry programs assist citizens who reenter society following their incarceration (Department of Justice Archives, 2017). Despite the wrongful conviction of innocent individuals, most governments in the United States do not currently offer specific reentry services for exonerees (Clow, 2017). Even though both the wrongfully convicted and rightfully convicted experience imprisonment and barriers to successful reentry, their reentry experience differs, as the wrongfully convicted and exonerated are not granted access to government services.

Scholars have investigated the victims of wrongful convictions as they transition back into society once they are exonerated. However, most of this research is focused on exonerees' obstacles and problems once released from prison (Westervelt & Cook, 2010). Research has identified many barriers to reintegration, including race, the stigma of

having a criminal record, and the struggle for available support resources (Goffman, 1963; Howard, 2019; Martin & Moore, 2018; Scherr et al., 2018). Research has further discussed other issues exonerees have to address upon release. Howard (2019) found that Black exonerees' were stigmatized at a greater rate than White exonerees. For instance, Howard (2019) demonstrated that while Black men are 8% of the United States population, 60% were freed through DNA exoneration of only 356 people (Innocence Project, 2020b). Research on being wrongfully convicted and exonerated has also explored the impact of being financially compensated. Karaffa and Koch (2017) found that states were accountable for paying exonerees due to the state's harm to exonerees. Exonerees' chances of a successful transition into society are not good if help for the wrongfully convicted and exonerated remained unaddressed (Scherr et al., 2018).

After an exhaustive review of the literature, I have found that an exoneree was no longer under the criminal justice system jurisdiction. Therefore, exonerees were not entitled to reentry services offered to other formerly convicted individuals. Research has also shown that an unwillingness to support reentry efforts to help the wrongfully convicted and exonerated remained unaddressed (Scherr et al., 2018). Until DNA testing, people did not acknowledge that wrongful convictions occurred. Services were available to parolees and not to exonerees (The Innocence Project, 2016). Provisions for services within compensation laws could only be found among some states. Connecticut provides employment training, counseling and more. Vermont offers the state health plan for about ten years. In North Carolina, an exoneree has access to job skills training and tuition

expenses (The Innocence Project, 2016). A state's social service, public works, and education systems should provide support to the exonerated.

Reports from the Innocence Project (2016) revealed that although emancipated through DNA, 40% of the 240 people exonerated have not received any form of assistance. Compensation statutes have made way for 15 exonerees to have access to support services (The Innocence Project, 2016). Prior findings have emphasized the importance of exonerees having access to comprehensive postrelease reintegration services (Chunias & Aufgang, 2008). As of 2018, some states such as Kansas have enacted laws to provide postrelease services. For example, exonerees in Kansas are entitled to housing and tuition assistance, state health care, and financial literacy training, in addition to monetary restoration.

However, postrelease reintegration services continue to be an issue for many states. In Maryland, a bill to expand postexoneration compensation and services was proposed but was vetoed. The literature gap is that the wrongfully convicted and exonerated are left lacking the resources or help needed to transition back into society or to recover from the trauma of being wrongfully convicted and exonerated (Kukucka & Evelo, 2019). This study provided empirical research that may lead to policy changes for individuals exonerated to include adequate reentry services, especially human services. The policy reforms are necessary and meaningful to help exonerees become effective members of society (Scherr et al., 2018).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this general qualitative study was to explore how the lack of reentry services for individuals wrongfully convicted and exonerated have influenced their transition back into society. Presently, the United States government does not offer reintegration services to exonerees within their community (Clow, 2017). This study contributes to positive social change by providing empirical data of the experiences of those who were wrongfully convicted and exploring what services would aid in their successful transition. For a wrongfully convicted person, exoneration should be an end but also a new beginning. This qualitative study was needed to understand the postexoneration experiences and provide data to politicians and criminal justice officials to impact policies that grant exonerees access to human service reentry programs and state aid.

### **Research Questions**

In this general qualitative study, I explored the lack of resources, or the help needed for wrongfully convicted exonerees to transition back into society or recover from the trauma of their conviction and prison experience. The central research questions were created to obtain a better understanding of the phenomenon for this qualitative inquiry. The research questions that guided this study were:

RQ1: What support or reentry services, if any, would have enhanced or increased the chances of a successful transition into society for individuals wrongfully convicted and exonerated?

RQ2: How did a lack of reentry services associated with life, employment, shelter, health, and connections with family and friends influence the transition back into society of individuals wrongfully convicted and exonerated?

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework for the study was Kauzlarich et al.'s (2001) state harm framework. The state harm framework was initially designed to hold the government and its members accountable for its citizens' avoidable injuries due to an administration's actions (Kauzlarich et al., 2001). Kauzlarich et al. (2001, p. 183-189) offered six commonalities most state crime victims shared: (a) victims of state crime tend to be among the least socially powerful actors; (b) victimizers generally fail to recognize and understand institutional policies' nature, extent, and harmfulness, and if suffering and harm are acknowledged, it is often neutralized within the context of a sense of entitlement; (c) victims of state crime are often blamed for their suffering; (d) victims of state crime must generally rely on the victimizer, an associated institution, or civil society movements for redress; (e) victims of state crime are easy targets for repeated victimization; And (f) illegal state policies and practices manifest an attempt to achieve organizational, bureaucratic, or institutional goals. Kauzlarich et al. (2001) stated that when the shared practices become apparent, so would the structures of power, systematic violence, and government liability. The framework is covered in more depth in Chapter 2.

The theoretical framework's application called attention to exonerees' denial of the same assistance or reentry services from state or federal agencies designated to help formerly incarcerated persons and highlighted the state's role in the successful transition

for individuals wrongfully convicted and exonerated. The state's responsibility in the support services for the wrongfully convicted and exonerated was examined through a theoretical approach. The state harm framework was an ideal choice for the study's approach and research questions. It emphasized the role the state plays in creating and exacerbating the harms exonerees suffer. The theoretical framework was the lens to the study's social problem through the six commonalities shared by most state victims (Kauzlarich et al., 2001).

### **Nature of the Study**

The nature of this study was a general qualitative design. This approach is focused on describing experiences people share (Patton, 2014). With this design I sought to shed light on the lack of reentry services for those wrongfully convicted and exonerated and the key aspects of their lives affecting reintegration, employment, shelter, health, and connections with family and friends (Harding et al., 2019). I designed the study with the aim of better understanding reentry experience with a lack of support services for individuals wrongfully convicted and exonerated. The experience of those wrongfully convicted and exonerated was transcribed through the voices of the research participants. The participant criteria was adult males released from a U.S. State or Federal prison who were wrongfully convicted and exonerated for 2 years or less. I described and explained the wrongfully convicted and exonerated reentry experience. The approach to address the research questions began with an in-depth examination of the exonerees' reentry experiences.

I investigated the subjective, practical, and social conditions of the exonerees' reentry experience in the United States. For general qualitative research, a study's sample size may range from six participants (Morse, 1998) to eight participants (Cooper & Endacott, 2007). According to Guest et al. (2020), data saturation may be attained with interviews of six to 12 participants. This study's sample consisted of eight participants. Following a purposive guideline, I used the criterion sampling method to select participants (see Collingridge & Gantt, 2019). Given the opportunity to better communicate with the participants, I asked the first few participants to recommend others with similar criteria to participate in the research. I used this snowball sampling approach to connect with candidates who met the study participant criteria.

I coded participant data using an inductive coding technique. The steps to coding participant data involved: (a) reading transcription, (b) grouping related topics (setting aside unrelated topics), (c) reducing as codes, (d) categorizing topics using a descriptive word, and (e) analyzing data in each category. The inductive approach allowed the findings to emerge from the themes in the qualitative data. I used bracketing to remove any preconceived judgments and establish continued conversations between the participant and myself (see Collingridge & Gantt, 2019). The interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed from each participant's interview within 48 hours. Member checking validated completeness, as each interviewee reviewed transcriptions for accuracy. Follow-up questions were not needed for the study. I organized, manipulated, and analyzed data, identified common themes and patterns, and synthesized the information. Through the face-to-face interviews of participants for this study, I collected



data until saturation occurred. Any participant unable to meet face-to-face had the opportunity to conduct their interview via Zoom or telephone.

### **Definitions**

The following terms were used in the study and may have multiple meanings.

*Exoneration*: The invalidation of a conviction coupled with official action signifying the defendant's actual innocence, such as the dismissal of charges, acquittal on retrial, or a pardon (Acker & Zalman, 2017).

*Exonerees*: Individuals who are declared innocent and released from imprisonment due to constitutional or procedural errors that cannot be dismissed as harmless errors, and persons who were found to be innocent because of the testing of evidence (Gross & Shaffer, 2012).

*Support services*: The Continuum of Care section 24 CFR § 578.53 of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (1987) defines support services as programs that assist participants with their needs. I defined social support using Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs theory. Maslow's theory consists of five needs: physiological needs, safety needs, love and belongingness needs, esteem needs, and self-actualization.

*Wrongfully convicted*: Innocent people convicted and sentenced to prison are described as the "wrongly convicted, the erroneously convicted, the unjustly convicted and the unjustly imprisoned, among other terms" (Mostaghel, 2011 p. 504).

*Wrongful conviction*: The prison sentence is described as wrongful imprisonment, wrongful conviction, or unjust conviction (Mostaghel, 2011). It signifies that a factually innocent person has been found guilty of a crime (Acker & Zalman, 2017).

*State crime*: Referenced also as a political crime, government crime, and state-organized crime against individuals who have experienced economic, cultural, or physical harm and pain. Rejection or abuse resulting from the state actions or policies violate the law or human rights (Kauzlarich et al., 2001).

### **Assumptions**

For the study's benefit, I assumed the reentry experience of individuals wrongfully convicted and exonerated was an undue hardship. Accordingly, most formerly incarcerated individuals reenter their community with treatment and vocational needs unmet. In conducting the study, I assumed that the participants would answer the interview questions honestly and candidly. I assumed the sample's inclusion criteria were appropriate and assured that all participants were adult males released from a U.S. State or Federal prison, wrongfully convicted, and exonerated for 2 years or less. Also, I assumed participants would have a genuine interest in participating in the research with no other motives to be in the study.

Other assumptions were that the open-ended interview questions enabled exonerees to be unguarded with their feelings, attitudes, and understanding of their personal reentry experiences. I assumed the exonerees who voluntarily participated in the study would be interested in sharing their stories truthfully, so the gathered information they provide would be accurate. The assumptions listed were valid and came without evidence or statistical testing. The ideas were necessary for the study's context as they provided a basis for moving forward. The assumptions also helped to develop the theory,

which influenced the growth of the research. Once tested, these assumptions expanded the professional body of research.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

In this study I examined the aspects of a persons' life, employment, shelter, health, and connections with family and friends (Harding et al., 2019). Through no fault of their own, the wrongfully convicted and exonerated were imprisoned, lost shelter/property, financial earnings from previous employment, family, friends, and more (Innocence Project, 2016). Those who have served prison time can never get their lives back. This general qualitative study's scope involved interviews with eight wrongfully convicted and exonerated men on their experiences related to the lack of resources or help needed to transition back into society or recover from the trauma of being wrongfully convicted and exonerated. The study's core was that reentry services are not offered to wrongfully convicted exonerated individuals as are provided to formerly incarcerated individuals. Exonerees are, therefore, left without access to human service reentry programs and state aid. I intended to bring awareness of this violation of human rights that persists without state accountability.

The study included adult males released from a U.S. State or Federal prison who were wrongfully convicted and exonerated for 2 years or less. The study's delimitation excluded individuals released from local jails, females, males who did not experience wrongful conviction, and men who were wrongfully convicted and exonerated for more than 2 years. Reentry is a critical life transition to many people in the United States. Researchers found many methodological ways to analyze reentry. Most study focused on

one element of the reentry process, such as employment. Although these approaches provided key insights to the reentry process theory, I did not investigate the idea. The state harm philosophy best related to the phenomena of interest. The potential transferability of this qualitative inquiry involved my collecting rich descriptive data and purposive sampling. This process disclosed whether reentry services for the individuals wrongfully convicted and exonerated would have influenced their successful transition back into society. The evaluation of transferability included descriptive themes and criteria of the population. The outcomes depended on the participants' involvement and the environment as each influenced the other.

### **Limitations**

Qualitative studies come with limitations, challenges, and sometimes barriers. The limitation of this general qualitative study was that it could not be broadly generalized. The purposive sampling procedure decreased the generalizability of the findings. This study was not generalizable to all wrongful convictions and exonerated individuals. However, the number of participants was enough to attain data saturation. Another limitation presence in the interview process, which may have biased responses. Potential challenges that may also occur and are related to unknown conditions or factors in the participants' community could also bias the participants' responses. Another challenge that presented itself was participants' recollections of events, situations, and feelings. Not all people are equally articulate and perceptive. The qualitative limitation was that the design provided indirect information filtered through the views of the interviewee. The third challenge was meeting face-to-face to conduct interviews with participants from

various geographical locations amid the Covid pandemic. There was no other potential barrier to the study.

### **Significance**

The significance of the study was to add to the body of knowledge on the necessity to have reentry services in place in the areas of life, employment, shelter, health, and the connections with family and friends (Harding et al., 2019) for exonerees, as exoneration alone is not enough. The study's contribution to advanced practice and policy was to extend knowledge and generate positive social change in the discipline by providing awareness to policymakers and others in the criminal justice system to address the need for policies related to support services and state aid to exonerees. Scholarship of the discipline benefited from the study to advance practice to address the need for policies to support services and state aid for exonerees. The potential implications for positive social change that are consistent with and bounded by the scope of the study were to show the impact a lack of reentry services have on the success or hindrance of exoneree transitions and to aid criminal justice administrators, politicians, and state governments to consider policies that include services to support employment, shelter, health, and connections with family and friends during reintegration.

### **Summary**

The problem is that reentry services are only provided to ex-offenders and not to wrongfully convicted and exonerated individuals. This general qualitative study explored how reentry services are provided for the individuals wrongfully convicted and exonerated and how those services or lack thereof have influenced their transition back

into society. I used the state crime/harm framework to examine the state's accountability in contributing to the lack of support services for those wrongfully convicted and exonerated. In Chapter 2, I review the literature on whether reentry services for the individuals wrongfully convicted and exonerated would have influenced their transition back into society. Anyone can be indicted and be wrongfully convicted. Chapter 2 provides a synthesis of the literature that guided the study.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

The purpose of this general qualitative study was to explore how the lack of reentry services for individuals wrongfully convicted and exonerated have influenced their transition back into society. Wrongful convictions destroy society's self-assurance in the criminal justice system as public safety is violated when the wrong person is apprehended. The criminal justice system aims to serve and protect society by recognizing individuals who have and have not violated the law. The determination of guilt or innocence falls on the police officials, prosecutors, defense attorneys, judges, and jurors. Because the structure relies on human judgment, errors leading to wrongful convictions can sometimes occur. Wrongful convictions were not a new concern to the criminal justice community. In the eighteenth century, the United States Constitution, and the American criminal justice system, referred to wrongful convictions as "mis-seated punishment" (Bentham, 2009, p. 471) when the innocent was punished rather than the guilty.

Researchers and the media's topic of wrongful convictions became popular due to DNA testing and other factors (Ramsey, 2019). Amidst the increasing concern over the possible number of innocent people losing years of their lives in prison, this study explored the problem that although reentry services are provided to ex-offenders, reentry services are not offered to individuals wrongfully convicted and exonerated. Current literature also emphasized the relevance of the problem.

The National Registry of Exonerations data showed that although exoneration numbers have grown from 24 in 1989 to almost 174 by 2018 (Cabral, 2021), exonerees

did not have access to reentry programs and state aid (Witness to Innocence, n.d.). According to the literature, formerly incarcerated individuals reentering society can access support services (Martin & Moore, 2018). Despite the wrongful conviction of many innocent individuals, most governments in the United States do not currently offer specific community reintegration services for exonerees (Clow, 2017). The current study contributed to extending previous research on exonerees' lack of reentry support services. Although exonerees and parolees have the same needs, some exonerees found that they were not eligible for parolees' limited services (Clow, 2017). Exonerees are left lacking the resources and help needed to recover from the trauma of being wrongfully convicted and exonerated (Kukucka et al., 2020). In Chapter 2 I explain the literature search strategy, list key search terms, and describe current expert research. I discuss the theoretical foundation of the study and describe how and why the theory related to the study and the research questions. The literature review section provides an exhaustive review of the current literature. Finally, the summary concludes with what is known and not known in the discipline related to the experiences of wrongfully convicted people trying to gain access to reentry services, especially human services.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

I conducted many combinations of search terms to find the most appropriate search algorithm. To further ensure a thorough search, I analyzed numerous works of literature. I examined current published peer-reviewed literature on wrongful convictions and exoneration, race, employment, shelter, health, family and friends, and reentry into society. I reviewed the literature by utilizing Walden University's library site. I entered



the following final search terms into ProQuest, Google Scholar, Taylor and Francis Online, Criminal Justice, and government sites. The selected literature was based on the content's relevance to this paper's subject. Those that were not directly relevant to the subject were discarded. To complete the literature search strategy, I used critical concepts of the research questions to retrieve accurate results. Key search terms and combinations of search terms used were a *wrongful conviction*, *false conviction*, *innocence*, *exoneree/exoneration*, *reentry*, *lifer reentry and reentry for parolees*, *capital punishment*, *post-incarceration*, *social harm*, *state crime*, *race and post-incarceration*, *reentry support services*, *health and reentry*, *housing and reentry*, *family and friends and reentry*, *employment and reentry*, *reintegrate into society*, *after incarceration*, and *formerly incarcerated*.

I obtained additional information from the Innocence Project, The National Registry of Exonerations, and the Death Penalty Information Center. To identify germane scholarship, the articles were evaluated to determine relevance to the study. Firstly, I gathered all articles related to qualitative research and reentry. The articles, which contained keywords mentioned above, were included in my initial list. I used a checklist to document all the required information, including reentry and life, employment, shelter, health, and connections with family and friends.

The literature review did not provide any empirical studies on whether reentry services for the individuals wrongfully convicted and exonerated would have influenced their successful transition back into society. The review, however, did expose some challenges that may impact successful transition back into the community. As part of my

study, I included the challenges that Black exonerees encounter compared to White exonerees, along with the appropriate theory. This inductive approach allowed me to explore and to provide an outcome that has little existing reentry research. Through this inductive approach, a theme applicable to state crime materialized. The guiding theoretical framework in this investigation was drawn from the state crime literature.

### **Theoretical Foundation**

The study's theoretical framework was Kauzlarich et al. (2001) state crime/harm framework. By applying the theoretical framework, I understood the undue hardship for exonerees when assistance from government agencies to formerly incarcerated people is inconsistently or unfairly dispensed. The theoretical framework highlights the state's responsibility to support reentry by funding postincarceration programs and medical health treatment to help formerly incarcerated individuals such as wrongfully convicted and exonerated persons successfully transition (APA, 2017). Kauzlarich et al., in their 2001 article "*Toward a Victimology of State Crime*," provided a valuable model for understanding exonerees' experience with the state. Research has fallen short of delivering a theoretical understanding of the wrongfully convicted and exonerated lack of resources or needed help to transition back into society and to recover from the trauma of being wrongfully convicted and exonerated.

Here, I present Kauzlarich et al. (2001) analysis on state crime victims to identify the barriers and obstacles exonerees face upon release. I examined the state's role in contributing to the lack of service for the wrongfully convicted and exonerated through the theoretical lens. The state crime framework was the ideal choice for this study. It

provided insights through Kauzlarich, Matthews, and Miller six commonalities to address the study's research questions.

The following commonalities were taken directly from Kauzlarich et al. (2001 p.183–189):

1. Victims of state crime tend to be among the least socially powerful actors—the state's ability to control others varies according to the “class” of the individual. State harms usually occur when representatives of the state exercise their power and harm helpless people who cannot defend themselves or counterattack the harm.
2. Victimiziers generally fail to recognize and understand the nature, extent, and harmfulness of their institutional policies. If suffering and harm are acknowledged, it is often neutralized within the context of a sense of entitlement. Sadly, state representatives are seldom held accountable for their illegal behavior. Immune from civil liability unless the act is willful and malicious, prosecutors are rewarded for high imprisonment.
3. Victims of state crime are often blamed for their suffering. The phrase “they must have been guilty” is commonly heard from family, friends and community members accusing them of their dilemma.
4. Victims of state crime must generally rely on the victimizer, an associated institution, or civil social movements for redress. Upon release, exonerees must request expungement or cancellation of their criminal records and compensation for their wrongful convictions. Sadly, the request must come

from the same justice system whose misconduct, carelessness, or oversight led to their wrongful convictions.

5. Victims of state crime are easy targets for repeated victimization. State officials repeat the harm experienced by most state crime victims who lack meaningful assistance towards establishing new lives for those they have harmed.
6. While committed by individuals and groups of individuals, illegal state policies and practices are manifestations of attempting to achieve organizational, bureaucratic, or institutional goals.

The state is instrumental in the persistence of organized harms caused by its agencies. Legal investigations are based on the trust that the justice system builds a case against a guilty person. The consequences of this prejudice may result in evidence that supports the guilt of the suspect. Kauzlarich et al. (2001) provided a framework for understanding victims of wrongful convictions as victims of state-produced harms. The variety of damages suffered by exonerees justified this victimology. Exonerees are victims because they have been wrongfully convicted and incarcerated for crimes, they did not commit due to the state's action or power (Kauzlarich et al., 2001). Whether the state or its officials' behavior is willful, illegal, schemes of public pressure, inequality of resources, or carelessness in the criminal justice system, wrongful convictions end with injuries to their victims (Westervelt & Cook, 2010). Victimization of the wrongfully convicted and exonerated continues after release when exonerees are left lacking the

resources and help needed to recover from the trauma of being wrongfully convicted (Kukucka et al., 2020).

Kauzlarich et al.'s (2001) state crime framework explored the wrongfully convicted and exonerated reentry experiences. This framework related to the study as the commonalities emphasized the state's role in the harms exonerees suffer upon reentry. The state crime framework was initially designed to hold the government and its members accountable for their citizens' avoidable injuries due to their actions (Kauzlarich et al., 2001). Prior works on state crime suggested more criminological attention to unethical and illegal activities of states and governments. During the 1970s and 1980s, state crime was examined by criminologists and sociologists (Falk et al. 1971). Experts such as Clinard and Quinney (1973), Michalowski (1985), Quinney (1980), and Simon and Eitzen (1982) explored unlawful state practices. Chambliss' 1989 called for the study of more harmful and insidious forms of crime.

The early 1990s saw a surge in state crime research. Barak's (1991), from a criminological perspective, investigated state crime. Tunnell (1993), through case studies, explored the state's role in undermining labor movements, the facilitation of patriarchy, and corporate crime. Ross (1995) explained how international, regulatory, and other forms of law and social control might contain, control, deter or decrease incidences of unethical and illegal state actions. Recent studies included Friedrichs (1998) and Ross (1995) examining state crime and controlling state crime. Despite the plethora of works written on state crime since 1995 (Green and Ward 2000; Kramer and Kauzlarich 1999; Matthews and Kauzlarich 2000; Ross, 1998; Ross et al. 2000), only one scholarly article

explicitly embraced a criminological approach to state crime (Kauzlarich and Kramer 1998).

In sum, while there have been some critical developments in the study of state crime over the past few years, the subject has yet to address the experiences of post exoneration and exonerees access to human service reentry programs and state aid. I used the state crime framework to analyze and identify the state's contribution to the wrongfully convicted and exonerated social problems after release. Kauzlarich et al. (2001) used the six commonalities to identify state crime victims. The six commonalities specifically relate to the wrongfully convicted and exonerated. They have experienced social and structural harm because of the state actions or policies that violate the law and human rights (Kauzlarich et al. 2001). In 2019, governmental harm was found in 54% of wrongful conviction cases and 79% of homicide exonerations in 2018 (Weintraub, 2020). The research questions were built upon the existing theory to advance the phenomenon of state crime to victims wrongfully convicted and exonerated and bring insights into the state's role in constructing the harms with which exonerees struggle.

### **Literature Review**

Scholars have investigated wrongful convictions to understand the phenomenon (Deshay, 2016). Upon re-entry, a criminal record prohibits many from the essentials of life, shelter, employment, health, and connections with family and friends. According to Berghuis (2018), reentry programs should be supported for everyone formerly incarcerated. Exonerations have received national attention from the media highlighting those working to exonerate the wrongfully convicted and the role of DNA in helping

individuals prove their innocence. The postconviction review body offers a solution to innocent people of the crime they have been convicted of and faces the question of what is meant by innocence (Leverick et al., 2017). Most wrongful conviction studies focused on the causes of miscarriages of justice (Bedau, 2003; Fessinger et al., 2020; He, 2015; Schapiro, 2020). However, many scholars emphasized the most common factors of wrongful convictions as eyewitness misidentification, inadequate forensic science, false confessions/admissions, government misconduct, informants, and corrupt lawyering (Garrett, 2011; Schapiro, 2020; Dwyer, Neufeld, & Scheck, 2003).

Studies of wrongful convictions document the problem's concept, provided specifics on individual cases of wrongful conviction, and have shown the lawful and social factors leading to wrongful convictions (Norris et al., 2019). I used Kauzlarich et al. (2001) theoretical perspective to shed light on the social problem and address the gap in the literature that the wrongfully convicted and exonerated are left lacking the resources or help needed transitioning back into society (Kukucka et al., 2020). Researchers in the discipline have approached the problem of individuals wrongfully convicted and exonerated in different ways. Scholars have also identified that a disproportionate rate of wrongful convictions exists among blacks in the United States. (Williams, 2019; Gross, Possley, and Stephens, 2017).

Guided by literature that describes the integration of formerly incarcerated individuals, the study applied a theoretical framework that considers the experience and level of reintegration to be a function of individuals' social, economic, and cultural resources at the time of their release; the social, economic, and institutional

circumstances they return to; and the fit between these individuals and their environments. Research on the role of race in exonerations showed that black men and women face different and more severe obstacles to accurate convictions than their white counterparts (Free & Ruesink, 2012). The study highlights social and structural influences of reintegration, including race and government, using state crime commonalities reflected in Harding et al. (2019) facets of a person's life, employment, shelter, health, and connections with family and friends.

The five reintegration contexts form the core of the study framework. About 608,000 individuals reentered into society in 2019 (Bureau of Justice Statistics, n.d.). The reentry into society impacted the individuals, their families, and their communities. Formerly incarcerated individuals must find housing, employment, and access to health care, in addition to reintegrating themselves with their families and communities (APA, 2017). In many states, exonerees reenter society lacking social services or support necessary to find housing, employment, or assistance with mental health issues because they are not perceived as the state's responsibility (Weigand, 2009). For reentry practices to be effective, it is essential to recognize the relationship between behavioral, physical, and relational health (APA, 2017). Although other post-exoneration barriers have been linked to the challenges of reentry, we limit our focus to these five areas because it is a necessity to have reentry services in places like the aspect of a person's life, employment, shelter, health, and connections with family and friends (Harding et al., 2019) for exonerees, exoneration is not enough



## **A Person's Life**

Victims of state crime tend to be among the least socially powerful actors. This is accurate for those wrongly convicted. Victims of wrongful convictions are individuals at the societal level with damaged esteem, lower status, and related powerlessness and who look different or belong to a certain class (Zannella et al., 2020). Exonerated individuals need to learn to cope with these personal and relationship difficulties but often lack the resources. The harm of wrongful conviction is not biased to those currently incarcerated, people with serious offenses, or passed on. Harm continues in the exoneree relatives' lives after their death (Leverick et al., 2017). Research has documented stigma toward people varying from visible indicators, like skin color, to less noticeable, such as a person's criminal background (Clow et al., 2015; Rade et al., 2016). A wrongful conviction has a defaming influence on one's life (Leverick et al., 2017).

In the United States, African Americans have been incarcerated 5.1 times the sentence of whites. In Iowa, Minnesota, New Jersey, Vermont, and Wisconsin, the rate is above 10 to 1 (Nellis, 2016). Wrongful Convictions are not limited to only the United States. It is an international issue. Howard (2019), through a qualitative study, found that race impacted people's perceptions of exonerated individuals. Table 1 is a depiction of race and the types of crime by offenders. As used in Table 1 and throughout this study, people identified as either "White" or "Black" do not include Hispanic or Latino individuals.

**Table 1***Exonerations By Race of Offender and Type of Crime*

| Types of crime        | White | Black | Hispanic | Other |
|-----------------------|-------|-------|----------|-------|
| Murder (1096)         | 386   | 608   | 136      | 20    |
| Child sex abuse (297) | 181   | 79    | 30       | 7     |
| Sexual assault (345)  | 116   | 203   | 23       | 4     |
| Other crimes (398)    | 340   | 525   | 157      | 36    |
| ALL CRIMES (2,858)    | 1023  | 1415  | 346      | 67    |

*Note.* (N = 2,858). Source: The National Registry of Exonerations, 2021.

Although racial bias is vast, it is frequently overlooked by most Americans. Prison stay is extended for exonerated black defendants than their white colleagues (Gross et al., 2017). Scholars like Free and Ruesink (2012) and Gross et al. (2017) noted that the average prison time Blacks served before being released is 10.4 years compared to the 7.4 years served by white exonerees. The decision and belief of guilt are rampant in cases where the suspect is black. These racial disparities in our legal system continue to lead to unjust outcomes for black people.

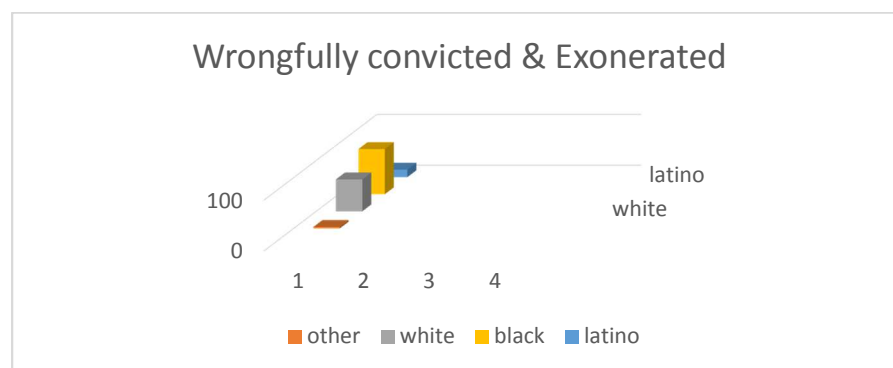
According to the National Registry of Exonerations (2021), 532 of individuals were exonerated due to DNA testing. The other 2235 was exonerated through other findings. Since 1989, The National Registry of Exoneration (2021) reports 2,767 exonerations in 2020. Although the American population is comprised of only 14% African Americans (Pew Research Center, 2021), blacks represent 1,415 of the 2,767 exonerations listed in the National Registry of Exonerations (2021). The Death Penalty

Information Center (2017) reports that since 1976, 76% of blacks were executed in the United States because their victims were white. The outcome for blacks convicted of killing a white person is death row or execution.

Race plays a central role in our criminal justice system, from being stopped, arrested, sentenced, and executed. No facet of black life is exempt from the stranglehold of racism (Forman Jr., 2012 p. 88). Although research on the role race plays in wrongful convictions has been limited, present studies reported that black people are more likely than white people to be wrongfully convicted of murder (Gross, Possley, and Stephens, 2017). The Death Penalty Information Center [DPIC] (2017) confirmed these findings, showing that since 1973, 170 innocent people have been released from death row. Reports from the (DPIC, 2017) database validated 89 black, 63 white, 15 Hispanics, and three other race/unknown as being wrongfully convicted and exonerated. For example, Figure 1 presents the percentages of wrongfully convicted and exonerated by their race.

**Figure 1**

*Percentages of Wrongfully Convicted and Exonerated by Race*



Source: Innocent Project, 2020a

“Black people in our country are at a higher risk of being wrongfully convicted (Innocent Project, 2020a)” The process of establishing innocence for all those wrongfully convicted is difficult. It is further complicated when the individual is black (Innocent Project, 2020a). Western (2018) found that formerly incarcerated individuals experienced hardship during the first year back into society. From depending on others for their housing to employment, mental illnesses, and addiction. Most formerly incarcerated people could not find work. The one aspect that differentiates the rightfully convicted reentry from those wrongfully convicted is the government’s lack of services for the wrongfully convicted and exonerated.

Victims of state crime are often blamed for their suffering. Criticism is usual among victims of wrongful convictions. Exonerees are held responsible for their convictions because it is so difficult for exonerees to prove their innocence. Individuals, such as employers, landlords, government, and community members, may believe that exonerees who maintain their innocence are dishonest and therefore view them guilty. According to the just-world hypothesis (Lerner, 1980; Reich & Wang, 2015), individuals may employ victim-blaming and derogation to rationalize their beliefs that exonerees are not innocent (Zannella et al., 2020). Bandura’s (1982) self-efficacy concept is useful in understanding reentry as it is an apparatus for change. A wrongfully convicted and exonerated person may be able to walk out of prison. However, returning to society is not easy. The wrongfully convicted and exonerated individual suffered years of loss. Being free and no longer imprisoned is not an experience of unaffected freedom.

The wrongfully convicted and exonerated return to society with no prospect of gaining or keeping employment, building a future, or supporting a family. Zannella et al. (2020) indicated that individuals who experience stigma experience an increased risk to their health, such as depression, low self-esteem, and self-worth. Individuals with low self-efficacy lack the willpower to overcome obstacles (Bandura, 1982). In decision making, a person's beliefs can influence the events that affect his life. In our technological era, employment skills may be outdated by the time of an exoneree's release. An exoneree may be labeled and stigmatized in their communities. Yet, the wrongfully convicted and exonerated are released by representatives of the state into society without services.

Prison release is not the end of an exoneree's struggle. Although the wrongfully convicted individual and parolees experience the same stigma, exonerees are left without support services. Even though wrongful imprisonment may result in psychological trauma (Simms, 2016), few reentry services are available for exonerated individuals than parolees' services (Goldberg et al., 2020). The wrongfully convicted and exonerated are ineligible for services provided to parolees and formerly incarcerated individual, such as work release programs, vocational programs, and transition homes, when attempting to reintegrate back into their community (Zannella et al., 2020). While those formerly incarcerated are viewed as a risk, exonerees are seen as individuals who committed a crime and escaped punishment (Zannella et al., 2020).

Individuals with criminal records face many collateral consequences upon reentering society. According to the United States Commission on Civil Rights (USCCR,

2019), collateral consequences are legal limitations and restraints placed on those formerly incarcerated. These consequences generate social and economic barriers for individuals reentering society with criminal histories. The previous study has also shown that this stigma affects both the rightfully convicted and the wrongfully convicted (Blandisi et al., 2015; Westervelt & Cook, 2018). The adverse penalties affect and produce difficulties in obtaining human services.

The influence affects individuals with criminal records, spreads into poor communities, and negatively disrupts families. Today, a felony conviction in most states can eliminate an individual's voting rights signed into law in 1965. The act prohibited discriminatory practices that prevented Black people from voting and registering to vote (History.com Editors, 2009). The Fourteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution explicitly recognizes the states' power to deny individuals' right to vote guilty of participation in crimes.

A person's color can also exclude him from participating in voting. Felon disenfranchisement laws prohibit an American citizen from voting because of a prior felony conviction regardless of how relevant the felony is to the right, ability, or competency to vote (Kelly, 2019 p. 1). Race and felon disenfranchisement in voting rights can lead to segregation of certain racial and ethnic groups. Twelve states permanently disenfranchise felons, representing 50% of the disenfranchised population (Christian & Walker, 2021). As a result, records indicated that more African Americans are disenfranchised today than in 1870 due to discriminatory policies (Kelly, 2019). The

portrayal of these discriminatory practices could be seen in the privatizing of our correctional system.

The privatizing of corrections has turned prisoners into merchandise for capital gain. The demand was matched with the disproportionate imprisonment of minorities, the poor, and, increasingly, the wrongfully convicted (William and Battle, 2017). The state used the justice systems to show racism and inflict harm onto undeserving marginalized bodies in plain sight (Williams, 2019). This study contributed to the literature by using qualitative to understand better and synthesized the experiences of the wrongfully convicted and exonerated individual after release; and to learn what support or reentry services, if any, would have enhanced or increased the chances of a successful transition into society. To understand their experiences and make their transitions easier, speaking with, understanding, and listening to exonerees' stories was necessary. There were no commonalities to their story or their experience. No exoneree has lived through the same experience (Westervelt and Cook, 2018). Bandura's self-efficacy to persevere in the face of difficulties was rooted in the core belief that one has the power to affect changes by his actions. However, the harmful reentry experience also affected the ability to obtain employment, which is a factor for successful reintegration. In addition to the shame of a criminal record and incarceration, exonerees faced another barrier of having little or no employment history (McGrew & Hanks, 2017).

### **Employment**

Victims of state crime relied on the victimizer to restore their lives. Employment at times may soften the barriers of reentry by helping those formerly incarcerated obtain

economic security, shelter, health, and mental care. Exonerees, however, often must depend on the very justice system whose misconduct, carelessness, or oversight led to their wrongful convictions (Westervelt & Cook, 2010). Although exonerees may have experienced working in prison, most do not have specialized skills (The Innocence Project, 2020a). Cherney and Fitzgerald (2016) indicated that employment was critical to a successful reintegration as it intertwines with other social and economic needs. Exonerees are left with only a high school education and little experience to tackle today's advancement in computers and technology (The Innocence Project, 2020a). Research suggests that exonerated individuals may experience employment discrimination much like formerly incarcerated individuals. Employment is a significant problem confronting exonerees. A criminal record check blocks exonerees searching for employment, despite their exonerations (Westervelt & Cook, 2010). The lack of funds further hinders employment barriers to expunge the wrongful conviction charge (Shlosberg et al., 2012).

Discrimination occurs in the workplace against those reintegrating into society from incarceration. Since background checks are used in the decision process, employers are less likely to hire formerly incarcerated people (Christian & Walker, 2021). Western (2018) discovered that it is double jeopardy for Blacks or Latino. Being black or Latino hindered the opportunity of full-time work due to bias and non-qualifications. Exonerated individuals may also experience employment discrimination due to their criminal record after exoneration. Goldberg et al. (2020) discover that a prison record post-release costs make it difficult to get employment or unemployment, resulting in minimum paying jobs.



The licensing requirements to many jobs further provide obstacles to the employment of those formerly incarcerated. Ironically, the government prison vocational/training programs do not qualify formerly incarcerated people for employment once they reenter society. As Petersilia (2005) indicated, sometimes the jobs on which prison job programs focus require licensing for which the formerly incarcerated are ineligible. Kukucka, Applegarth, and Mello (2020) had individuals with hiring experience review job applications. The applications shared the same answers but differed in criminal status. Results demonstrated that not only, a request for more references was made from those wrongfully convicted and exonerated, but lower wages were offered. Through a series of online job postings, Clow (2017) showed us how potential employers view and feel about employing wrongly convicted individuals, parolees, and public members. Parolees and exonerees received significantly fewer email responses than members of the public.

In addition to difficulty finding a job, the wrongfully convicted and exonerated are without retirement funds (Goldberg et al., 2020). Social Security is unattainable because most exonerees do not have at least ten years of work history with contributions into a retirement fund (Goldberg et al., 2020). Exonerees does not have a retirement fund and is not eligible for social security. Although compensation could help offset some of this burden, compensation is not guaranteed nor available in all cases. The reality of reentry is oriented away from reintegration. We continue to see reentry stressors in our housing market far beyond the means of formerly incarcerated individuals.

## **Shelter**

Victimizers generally fail to recognize and understand the nature, extent, and harmfulness of institutional policies. If suffering and harm are acknowledged, it is often neutralized within the context of a sense of entitlement. Housing is essential following reintegration. The availability of housing is a basic human need (Maslow, 1943). Housing increases the possibility that formerly incarcerated individuals can rebuild as law-abiding citizens (Furst & Evans, 2017). Individuals returning from prison encounter obstacles when securing housing (Li, 2018). Barriers from conviction exclude public housing and cause discrimination from landlords. Exonerees find housing a complex task for many formerly incarcerated individuals (Evans et al., 2019). When wrongfully convicted individuals are released from prison, stable housing is imperative to their successful reintegration.

The formerly incarcerated individual search for housing is more difficult and important than finding a job (Petersilia, 2005). Housing is difficult to obtain for individuals transitioning from incarceration, as landlords are less likely to rent to them, isolating them from society. Zannella et al. (2020) investigated landlords' willingness to rent to exonerees compared to releasees and public members across Canada from differing ethnic backgrounds. The researchers found that landlords were less likely not to respond when the individual's race strengthens the criminal record. Landlords discriminate against those rightfully and wrongfully convicted individuals in their attempt to secure housing upon release (Li, 2018). As a direct result, homelessness may occur.

Research proposes two forms of housing discrimination: taste-based and statistical. Becker's (1971) taste-based discrimination is based on preferences. For example, a landlord may choose to lease based on characteristics and may determine those preferences (Koopmans et al., 2019). According to Arrow (1973) and Phelps (1972), the other form of housing discrimination is statistical discrimination. This sort of discrimination is based upon visible markers of a specific group, such as one's racial group, or those with a criminal record or people within a low socioeconomic status (Koopmans et al., 2019). Based on prior research, Black and Indigenous individuals and formerly incarcerated individuals face the same dilemma.

Exonerees who are Black or Indigenous may likely experience compounded effects of housing discrimination. Housing discrimination confronting Black individuals in the United States has been well-known for eras (Carpusor & Loges, 2006; Fischer & Massey, 2004; Zubrinsky & Bobo, 1996). Recently, Evans, Blount-Hill, and Cubellis (2019) examined the impact of race, gender, and criminal history on the likelihood of securing housing. They found that a person's criminal history played a significant role in a landlord's willingness to rent to prospective tenants, such that landlords were willing to consider individuals with no criminal history more often than those with a criminal background. The Department of Housing and Urban Development (2016) prohibits owners from denying housing for having a criminal background, based on the policy restricting access to housing.

The rightfully convicted and wrongfully convicted face the same barriers in obtaining housing; however, wrongfully convicted individuals are ineligible for reentry

assistance (Zannella et al., 2020). Zannella et al. (2020) investigated the study found that housing discrimination is equal among rightfully and wrongfully convicted individuals. Since wrongful convictions are not expunged immediately upon release, many wrongfully convicted and exonerated individuals leave prison with a criminal record (Li, 2018). Research has documented that having a criminal record hinders formerly incarcerated individuals from qualifying for housing (Furst & Evans, 2017). The threat of stable housing can lead to homelessness after exoneration (Li, 2018). Formerly incarcerated individuals are susceptible to homelessness because of the many hindrances in securing housing. The exonerated may also experience greater health issues due to the extra trauma added to the wrongful conviction itself (Goldberg et al., 2020).

## **Health**

While committed by individuals and groups of individuals, illegal state policies and practices are manifestations of attempting to achieve organizational, bureaucratic, or institutional goals. Upon release, most exonerees have serious health problems. The formerly incarcerated are challenged by physical and mental health problems, making reentry into the community even more trying given the intricacy of their reentry needs. Exonerees, however, are not considered part of the legal system and so lack access to the same prisoner reentry services offered to former inmates (Weigand, 2009; Westervelt & Cook, 2010). This lack of access to support services may further cause stress to exonerees' reentry experience (Weigand, 2009). Fahmy and Wallace (2019) study examined the role positive and negative family support have on an individual's post-release physical health. Positive social support favorably affects returning citizens'

physical health. Negative family interactions may exert a stronger impact on the already stressed reentering citizens as they attempt to get their lives on track (Mowen et al., 2019).

When exonerated individuals are released, their difficulties in reentry may exacerbate the mental health issues they experience. The mental outcome of being wrongfully prosecuted for a crime is portrayed as life-threatening and lifelong (Brook & Greenberg, 2021). Exonerated individuals are confronted with mental health issues while incarcerated and developed after release (Goldberg et al., 2020). According to the classical identity theory, the mental state in a person's mind at a particular time is identical to the person's brain at that time of maturity (Kauzlarich et al., 2001). While in prison, exonerees may change their behavior to survive prison life. As a result, their health effects are a lowered sense of self-worth and post-traumatic stress disorder.

Alexander-Bloch et al. (2020) has shown evidence supporting the need for post-incarceration mental health services for exonerated prisoners. The analysis was based on the mental health and sleep problems of exonerees across the United States. Of the thirteen male exonerees recruited and completed surveys on symptoms of anxiety, depression, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and sleep problems, 50% reported clinically significant levels of depression, anxiety, and PTSD symptoms. Exonerees' mental health issues have ongoing effects on prisoners, whether rightfully or wrongfully incarcerated (Goldberg et al., 2020). Prior scholarships have disclosed the mental health struggles of exonerated individuals upon reentry.

Research suggests that a significant number of formerly incarcerated individuals, including those exonerated, report post-incarceration mental health challenges, such as depression, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and anxiety (Bronson & Berzofsky, 2017; Mallik-Kane & Visser, 2008). Grounds (2005) examined mental health effects on eighteen exonerated men with no prior criminal history. Findings showed that most of the eighteen individuals experienced serious mental health issues post wrongful conviction. The majority met the diagnostic criteria for post-traumatic stress disorder and depression. Fourteen of the respondents exhibited a significant personality change after the wrongful conviction. Several experienced panic disorder, paranoia or were dependent on substances.

Wildeman et al. (2011) examined how those wrongfully convicted and punished experience life after exoneration. Data emerged from interviews with 55 exonerees participants. The study measured the psychological effects associated with a wrongful conviction. The findings revealed that a significant proportion of the exonerated individuals reported feeling signs of anxiety (40%), depression (44%), post-traumatic stress disorder (27%), or a combination of all the disorders.

Heilbrun et al. (2020) compared the mental health needs and adjustment of individuals returning to the community following completion of the sentence; individuals diverted from standard prosecution and into problem-solving courts, and individuals on probation to how an exonerated population differs from or is similar to these other populations. The study found that exonerees' release is not planned, and most are subjected to the media's attention. The shame of their charge compounds the challenges

to reentering the community. Grounds (2005) suggest that treatment would help exonerees and family members with PTSD and depression. Miscarriage of justice has been compared to trauma experienced by military veterans, immigrants, survivors of calamity and prisoners of war (Brooks and Greenberg, 2021).

The stressful experience influences disease trajectories for incarceration history (Wildeman & Wang, 2017). The formerly incarcerated may also be released with contagious diseases, illness, and physical injuries resulting from the prison environment, leading to negative mental and physical health outcomes (Deshay, 2016). Poor health makes individuals with chronic illness feel that the quality of their daily life is too challenging (Wallace & Wang, 2020). Formerly incarcerated individuals experience health issues due to the challenges to reintegration (Deshay, 2016).

The wrongfully convicted and exonerated face daily challenges shared by those who have been imprisoned. Reentry research found that others imprisoned share the identical struggle relating to housing, employment, social support, and stigma. However, the transition difficulties for the wrongfully convicted and exonerated are worsened by the little to no access to support services (Kauzlarich et al., 2001). Due to the challenges of obtaining public healthcare upon release, exonerees realize that they were more accessible to prison health care. Exonerees lack medical insurance. They struggle to pay health premiums and may have pre-existing conditions that put premiums out of range (Westervelt & Cook, 2010).

Innocence Project noted that Roy Brown spent 15 years in New York prison on a 25-Life sentence for a murder charge he did not commit. Upon exoneration, Roy Brown's

life expectancy was short because of his liver disease. Even though an organ transplant would save Roy as a prisoner, he was not eligible. As an exonerated man, Roy was without health insurance. Medicaid is not automatically given upon exoneration (The Innocence Project, 2020a). Additionally, the unskilled low-wage jobs exonerees may qualify for maybe without health benefits. For Roy, four months after his release, he received a liver transplant. Local support services ensured that Medicaid would cover Roy's urgent health needs.

Life after exoneration exposes exonerees to lack of work experience, humiliation due to incarceration, and a lack of support services for helping them with reintegration that led to additional stressors in building their post-exoneration life (Goldberg et al., 2020). Wildeman (2016) explains that the U.S. may be alone in confronting the issue between incarceration and health. Deshay (2016) reveals a positive and a negative approach to coping with a traumatic or stressful experience. Individuals taking a positive approach try to understand and resolve their problems. In seeking a resolution, individuals in this category tend to reach out for emotional support from others to cope. The other approach involves pretending the problem does not exist. Some people abuse substances to cope with their painful experiences (Deshay, 2016). Long after incarceration, the mental effect of wrongful imprisonment separates exonerees from friends and family, and society. Scholars that examined the relation of social support on health behaviors have found that family is the most important influence (Mowen et al., 2019).



## **Family and Friends**

Victims of state crime are easy targets for repeated victimization. Research has highlighted several principles important for successful reintegration, including one's life (Leverick et al., 2017), employment (Kukucka et al., 2020), shelter (Li, 2018), health (Mowen et al., 2019), and perhaps more so than any other factor, family support is recognized as a vital component for reentry success (Mowen et al., 2019). Family support relates to reentry success because families provide for the basic needs of returning individuals. However, existing research finds that high family support levels do not remove victimization during reentry (Mowen et al., 2019). In the United States, the wrongfully convicted and exonerated face economic and societal obstacles (Christian & Walker, 2020). These obstacles negatively affect and deter successful transition back into the community. Even with the public's awareness of wrongful convictions in the United States and the discrepancies in the criminal justice system, exonerated individuals may be revictimized after exonerated. Revictimization comes from the lack of assistance with reentry issues in employment, housing, mental health, and other areas of difficulty (Goldberg et al., 2020). Many exonerated individuals do not receive any government assistance upon reentry, even though individuals rightfully convicted may receive assistance in various forms.

Kauzlarich et al. (2001) state crime concept examined two sorts of administration harm. Focused harm, which represents a personal loss of an item. For example, the psychological damage of fear of being revictimized may occur during a break-in or feeling insecure and withdrawing from family and friends. The second, distributed harm,

affects secondary victims, like family members, neighborhoods, and society. Evidence shows that corrections' outcomes are not cost-effective and do not justify the costs to communities, families, and individuals (Datchi, Barretti & Thompson, 2016). Like most state crime victims, Exonerees exhibit re-victimization when the state government does not acknowledge and take responsibility for their errors (Kauzlarich et al., 2001). During wrongful incarceration, friends and family have married, children have grown, parents and grandparents have passed away. Frightful losses and feelings of what might have been follows the exoneree throughout their entire lives. Additionally, exonerees must cope with the perception within their communities.

Individuals' attitudes and perceptions within the community affect reintegration into communities (Christian & Walker, 2021). People are unwilling to engage in reintegration efforts because they believe in the exoneree's guilt (Scherr et al., 2018). Exonerees face the same stereotypes and beliefs that often are used towards guilty offenders (Clow & Leach, 2015). Research suggests that racial bias may also affect the decisions and attitudes of support to help exonerees (Clow et al., 2015). The state's failure to apologize and lend assistance in re-building the wrongfully convicted and exonerated lives is further induced by the exploitation. Many exonerees continue to live with the constant reminder of their painful past, shaping their futures (Kauzlarich et al., 2001).

Victims of state crime must rely on the victimizer, an associated institution, or civil social movements for reparation. Most people believe that the justice system comes without problems. Yet, for some men, reentry from incarceration is not an experience of

freedom (Williams, 2019). Formerly incarcerated individuals report being exploited and harassed by representatives of the state because of their criminal background. It is important to recognize that the criminal justice system attempts to achieve its goals due to pressure (Kauzlarich et al., 2001). Williams & Battle (2017) argued that Black Americans' punishment is connected to the rationalities of slavery that prolonged Blackness as animalistic and dangerous, that warrants humanizing and control. Wrongful convictions and exonerations validate the occurrence of an error in the criminal justice system. If any, the question over what support or reentry services would have enhanced or increased the chances of a successful transition into society for individuals wrongfully convicted and exonerated is neglected. The wrongfully convicted and exonerated are victims of the state (Kauzlarich et al., 2001). These individuals have been wrongly convicted and incarcerated due to illegal state action or the abuse of the state's power.

Understanding state crime's theoretical framework is significant in acknowledging the state's harm to the wrongfully convicted and exonerated. Scholars dispute the determination of a state crime and the elements that constitute a victim (Kauzlarich et al., 2001). The disagreement extends to whether a state crime includes crimes committed for the state or those in authority and whether the crime is in the best interests of an individual or a governmental need (Kauzlarich et al., 2001). The discrepancy further involves whether state crime should be defined by an objective, a legal standard, or a more subjectivist interpretation of harm-causing activities by the state (2001). Kauzlarich et al. (2001) state harm framework explains state crime as a variety of harms linked to its activity. The researchers further recognize state crime as an act that (a) causes pain to

individuals, groups, and property (b) is an action or inaction representative of the state or its agencies (c) committed by a governmental agency, organization, or representative thereof.

The state harm framework holds the government and its members accountable for its citizens' avoidable injuries because of their actions (Kauzlarich et al., 2001). Although innocent, the wrongfully convicted and exonerated are discarded to a life of hardship (Leuschner et al., 2020). The state abuses the human rights of exonerees' who are state victims. In the United States, those exonerated are not guaranteed the same rights as formerly incarcerated individuals after a reversed conviction (Rodd, 2017). With the state's limited resources, exonerees rely on others to meet their basic needs (de Vuono-Powell, Schweidler, Walters, & Zohrabi, 2015).

The inappropriate conduct of state officials is not viewed as a state crime until laws are introduced to render the state's conduct unlawful (Kauzlarich et al., 2001). Due to the state's actions and policies, state crime victims are mistreated for their human rights (Kauzlarich et al., 2001). One of the responsibilities of the government is to maintain order within the community. Instead, the government has failed to sustain order and instead has become an instigator of state harm. The crime extends as growth within the correction industry increases companies' profits from the criminal legal system and mass incarceration (Kruse, 2019).

The privatizing of corrections has turn prisoners into merchandise for capital. The demand is met with the disproportionate imprisonment of minorities, the poor, and, increasingly, the wrongfully convicted (William & Battle, 2017). The state uses justice

systems to show its form of racism and inflict harm onto undeserving marginalized bodies in plain sight (Williams, 2019). But for the state's wrongful actions in wrongfully convicting a person, the exonerated would not encounter these harms (Kauzlarich et al., 2001). These obstacles ripple throughout the exoneree's lifetime without assistance from social service agencies, dependent on family and friends' aid, and attorneys willing to provide free legal services. The state offers no aid to ease the difficulties upon post-exoneration, only creates additional obstacles. Exonerees must secure legal services to have records expunged, civil rights restored, and pursue their rights to compensation. In many cases, exonerees are uninformed about being released. They are unskilled about how to manage these practical issues upon reentry.

### **Summary and Conclusions**

Wrongful convictions disturb the stronghold of criminal justice. They are unexpected cataclysms to the wrongfully convicted and their families, pushing the criminal justice system towards progress and development. The difference between exonerees and parolees is that exonerees are forced to face these obstacles without guilt. Past and present scholarship agrees that the wrongfully convicted and exonerated face challenges, obstacles, and barriers upon reentry into their communities. The wrongfully convicted and exonerated reported experiencing negative psychological effects upon their release. They also report experiencing social factors, such as family and social networks, personal factors, self efficacy, mental-physical health, institutional factors, including barriers to employment and housing and government benefits (Zannelle et al., 2020; Westervelt and Cook, 2018; Liem and Garcin, 2014).

Understandably, these sets of factors may influence reentry success for all returning citizens. A growing number of researchers have concentrated on wrongful convictions and the factors that cause them to happen (Shlosberg et al., 2012). Koehler (2019) argued the current state of compensation statutes across the U.S.; the influence of race on the perceptions of those who falsely confessed to a crime is examined by Howard (2019). Westervelt and Cook (2018) examined the enduring post-exoneration trauma experienced by death row inmates.

Although research has established that exonerees experience a lack of reintegration support upon release, very little is known about the lack of support services for individuals who have been wrongfully convicted and exonerated (Kukucka et al., 2020). This study explored how reentry services are provided for the individuals wrongfully convicted and exonerated and have influenced their transition back into society. The study explored further how a lack of reentry services associated with one's life, employment, shelter, health, and connections with family and friends influence the transition back into society.

The study is needed to understand postexoneration experiences and provide empirical research for politicians and criminal justice officials to impact policies that grant exonerees access to human service reentry programs and state aid. The research can contribute, extend knowledge, and generate positive social change in the discipline by forming awareness to policymakers and others in the criminal justice system to address the need for policies related to support services and state aid for exonerees. The study investigated what support or reentry services, if any, would have enhanced or increased

the chances of a successful transition into society for individuals wrongfully convicted and exonerated.

The study explored how a lack of reentry services associated with a person's life, employment, shelter, health, and connections with family and friends influenced the wrongfully convicted and exonerated transition back into society. As such, the study relied on the insights of the wrongfully convicted and exonerated participants. Exonerees face many reentry obstacles and barriers. Factors that affect these negative patterns are recognized through studies (Clow & Leach, 2015; Kukucka & Evelo, 2019). Indeed, no amount of money could make up for the undue hardship experienced by exonerees. Their loss is unfathomable. Exonerees cannot recover the lost years, but a brighter future is attainable. To allow exonerees to voice their experience, we now need to focus on the qualitative methodology developed to learn more about this population. The subsequent section educates readers on the qualitative research's intent by discussing the design and reflecting on the researcher's role in the study. The section also included data sources, the protocol for data recording, and the steps for analyzing the information through data analysis, mentioning approaches for accuracy or validity of data collected.

## Chapter 3: Research Method

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this general qualitative study was to explore how the lack of reentry services for individuals wrongfully convicted and exonerated have influenced their transition back into society. In Chapter 3, I identify the research design and rationale. In this section, I discuss the research tradition and define the central phenomenon of the study. I then explain the role of the researcher. Here, I reveal any personal/ professional relationships with the participants and discuss any researcher biases. In the methodology section I explain procedures so other researchers can replicate the study to organize and analyze the participants' information. Chapter 3 concludes with a description of the study's ethical procedures and Institutional Review Board (IRB) agreements, followed by a preview of Chapter 4.

### **Research Design and Rationale**

The central research questions are created to get a better understanding of the phenomenon for this qualitative inquiry. The research questions guiding this study are:

RQ1: What support or reentry services, if any, would have enhanced or increased the chances of a successful transition into society for individuals wrongfully convicted and exonerated?

RQ2: How did a lack of reentry services associated with life, employment, shelter, health, and connections with family and friends influence the transition back into society of individuals wrongfully convicted and exonerated?



This general qualitative study's central phenomenon was how the lack of reentry services for individuals wrongfully convicted and exonerated has influenced their transition back into society. Levitt et al. (2017) explained how the qualitative researcher generally explores meanings and insights in each situation. As the researcher, I aimed to provide detailed understanding into the human behavior, emotion, attitudes, and experiences of the participants.

The research tradition I employed in this study was general qualitative design. Percy et al. (2015) suggested a general qualitative approach can bring truth and reality to a study and construct new knowledge with the study's participants and the generated data. None of the other qualitative approaches suited the aim of the study. Ethnography, case study, grounded theory, and phenomenology were inappropriate because the focus of the current study, the content of the information desired, and the data sought did not fit those approaches (see Percy et al., 2015). Furthermore, a quantitative research approach would have been less effective for this study. It would have dehumanized the wrongfully convicted and exonerated, portraying them as a number. Qualitative research can fill the void where numbers could not reach (Merriam & Grenier, 2019).

The general qualitative research design is considered especially suitable for understanding things in the outer world (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). The general qualitative approach was well suited for this study because it is based on the participants' perceptions and feelings (Bellamy et al., 2016). Specifically, a general qualitative inquiry reports the subjective opinion of the experience (Percy et al., 2015). General qualitative research views understand and allow engagement with those who are the experts in their

own experiences (Ravitch & Carl, 2019). This approach promoted a better understanding of the wrongfully convicted and exonerated attitudes and behavior from their perspective. I provided a descriptive analysis of the participants' ideas, concepts, images, and objectives in taking this approach. Through the qualitative process, I uncovered patterns, identified categories and themes, developed typologies, discovered relationships, cultivated explanations, extracted interpretations, developed critiques, and generated or advanced theories with the goal of building implications (see Onwuegbuzie & Denham, 2017).

### **Role of the Researcher**

In a general qualitative study, the researcher's role is significant. Ravitch and Carl (2019) addressed the researcher as the main instrument in the study. As the researcher and observer in the study, I recorded the wrongfully convicted and exonerated participants' experiences and behaviors without manipulation. Each participant's collected data were analyzed individually (see Percy et al., 2015). Although the participants shared certain experiences and views, each participant's reality with their experiences were presented and analyzed. Merriam and Grenier (2019) stated that the key analysis method for understanding a social phenomenon was from the participants' perspectives. As the study's main instrument, knowing the participants' experiences, enabled an understanding of their experience (see Harrison et al., 2017). Consequently, the interviews were conducted with adult males released from a U.S. State or Federal prison who were wrongfully convicted and exonerated for 2 years or less.

I conducted the study without any personal or professional relationships with the participants. I further did not hold any supervisory or instructor relationships involving positions of power with any participant. Because qualitative research can be susceptible to preconception (Sarniak, 2015), I asked quality questions at the right time and remained aware and focused on sources of biases. This assured the accuracy of participants' views and ensured that the research emulated the highest qualitative standards (Sarniak, 2015). As the researcher, biases could occur that potentially shaped the study due to my background, culture, and past experiences. I managed my personal biases by reflecting on how my background affected the study. To ensure ethical research, the study followed principles outlined by Walden Institutional Review Board (IRB). My role as the researcher was to explore my own experiences and be conscious of my biases, opinions, and assumptions. I introduced bracketing as part of the interview process. Bracketing is used during active communication between the participant and the researcher, eliminating preconceived judgments (Collingridge & Gantt, 2019).

To manage ethical research, I required acknowledgment of a completed informed consent from all candidates before the interview. The participants were allowed to consent to the agreement without pressure to participate in the study. Since the participants were from different regions in the United States, and the signed consents were accessible on-line. Interested participants were directed through Walden's email and presented with an online consent form. Before the interview, each participant received information about the project and a consent form. I explained the informed consent to participants and the candidate's voluntary participation in the research, the purpose, risks

and benefits of the research, and the techniques used to protect each participant's confidentiality.

To ensure confidentiality, participants identifying information was not accessible to the public, and answers were kept confidential. Interviews were limited to 60 minutes. If preferred, the participants' anonymity was maintained using their name initials. Recorded interviews and transcripts were safeguarded per Walden University's IRB regulations. A research journal was used during the interviews as well. The information from this research study was password-protected and stored on my laptop and backed up by the system's cloud.

### **Methodology**

I employed a general qualitative design with the themes of life, employment, shelter, health, and family and friends. In section I describe the steps taken to address the research question. The methodology gave sufficient detail to enable an inexperienced reader to replicate my study (Rudestam & Newton, 2015). The study's main purpose was to explore how reentry services are provided for the individuals wrongfully convicted and exonerated and how they influenced their transition back into society. The general qualitative study followed logically from the participation selection logic to the instrumentation section, describing the measures (data collection instrument and source) used in the study. The data analysis plan followed recruitment, participation, and data collection procedures, and trustworthiness and ethical procedures.

### **Participant Selection Logic**

The obligation of qualitative researchers is to purposefully select participants to help the researcher understand the problem and the research question (Creswell, 1998). The study's targeted population included males released and discharged from state or federal prisons who were wrongfully convicted and exonerated for 2 years or less. The sample size strategy for general qualitative research ranges from six participants (Morse, 1998) to eight participants (Cooper & Endacott, 2007). According to Guest et al. (2020), data saturation is attained with interviews of six to 12 participants. This study sample consisted of eight participants or until saturation. This qualitative data collection technique was aimed to generate descriptions from one-on-one interviews that used open-ended questioning with inductive probing (see Guest et al., 2020). The sample promoted various opinions, ideas, and reactions about real-world events or experiences (Percy et al., 2015).

The criterion on which participants were selected was a purposive sampling as considered by Campbell et al. (2020). Purposive sampling improved the study's rigor and trustworthiness of the data and the results (Campbell et al., 2020). The criterion sample was chosen because the research questions were specific to the particular group of interest characteristics, which were subsequently examined in detail. The sampling's key verified that the participants fit the criteria (Collingridge & Gantt, 2019).

Another sampling strategy was based on the snowballing sample. This method helped identified expert informants who have a great deal of knowledge about the phenomenon (Morse, 1991). The criteria on which participant selection was based were

adult males released from a U.S. state or federal prison who were wrongfully convicted and exonerated for 2 years or less. In addressing the research questions, candidates who met the criteria were chosen for the interview. This study sample consisted of eight participants or until saturation. The targeted population was developed, and information was retrieved, through public records from The National Registry of Exonerations (2020) release list.

The National Registry of Exonerations collects, analyzes, and disseminates information about all known exonerations of innocent criminal defendants in the United States from 1989 to the present. The Registry also provides searchable online statistical data about exonerees' cases (2020). Data obtained was used to identify candidates suitable for the study through the National Registry website. As a backup, the candidates were solicited by social media posters and invitation flyers on Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, Google, and other internet resources, as needed. Participants were provided with instructions on the nature and purpose of the investigation. According to Creswell (2013), another sampling approach involves saturation. Saturation is significant as it shows accuracy in the research (Morse, 1998). The nature of the qualitative study is to recruit participants until no new data emerges (Cooper and Endacott, 2007; Guest et al., 2020). Charmaz (2014) suggested that data collection should only be stopped when the categories or themes revealed are related. Saturation was attained when gathering fresh data did not reveal new information.

## **Instrumentation**

The semi structured interviews were audiotaped and conducted individually. Transcriptions were built from each participant within 48 hours of each interview. To validate completeness, transcriptions were reviewed by each interviewee for accuracy. Follow-up questions were also presented during that time, if needed. The data was analyzed, organized, and manipulated, and then the information was then synthesized into common themes and patterns. Through the face-to-face interview of participants for this study, data was collected until saturation occurred. The interview protocol for the data collection was researcher-produced. The questions were developed from Harding et al. (2019) facets for a person's life, employment, shelter, health and connection with family and friends. The open-ended questions were limited and sought to discover and understand the perspectives and worldviews of the exonerees. To establish the data collection instrument's sufficiency to answer the research questions, the interview protocol (see Appendix B) was validated by three faculty experts from Walden University. The data collection instrument was audio-recorded interviews shaped by this researcher. The instrument was appropriate for the current study, as the context and cultural specificity aligned with the current study's concept. Therefore, the current study concept, therefore, qualified the instrument as sufficient to answer the main research questions. The interviews are a tool to collect data surrounding the major research questions (Rudestam and Newton, 2015). As the mainstay of qualitative data collection, the interview questions provided deep, rich, individualized, and contextualized information significant to the qualitative study (Ravitch and Carl, 2019).

### **Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, Data Collection**

In this general qualitative research, the face-to-face interview was the primary source of data collection to discover the meaning of the participants' experience. Data for the adult males who are wrongfully convicted and exonerated two years or less in the United States was obtained from The National Registry of Exoneration 2020 release list. I collected the data through a semi-structured open-ended interview protocol. Audiotapes retrieved the intended views and opinions of the participants. The instrument aligned with the concepts of my study. It focused on understanding how the lack of reentry services for individuals wrongfully convicted and exonerated have influenced their transition back into society. The interview questions' intended purpose was to provide deep, rich, individualized, and contextualized information significant to the qualitative study (Ravitch and Carl, 2019).

Upon Walden University's IRB approval, I began with the participant selection for data collection and developed questions (see Appendix B) to guide the interview process. The data collection was conducted through a lengthy person-to-person interview, scheduled for 60 minutes on the bracketed topic and question guideline. My plan as the researcher was to have each participant interview once. To gain insight into the experiences, the interviews were audio-recorded, and a journal was used to document additional information on the participants' impressions, reactions, and other pertinent data collection information (Ravitch and Carl, 2019).

Although face-to-face interviews are preferred, interviews were managed through the Zoom application due to the current pandemic surging in the United States and



abroad. Coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic has imposed a complete shut-down of the face-to-face meeting (Dias et al., 2020). The unprecedented era of Covid-19 ushers in the practices of video conferencing platforms like Zoom (Dias et al., 2020). Conducting interviews via Zoom was beneficial, making the experience more convenient for parties, easing the participants' pressure, and suitable for participants in diverse geographic locations. Upon completion, each transcription was uploaded to NVivo, a qualitative data software program designed to label statements within the transcriptions, group them into categories, and then make interpretations or inferences (Williamson et al., 2016). The participants were questioned with pre-structured interview questions based on the researcher's pre-knowledge with opportunities for follow-up questions.

As recruitment resulted in too few participants; a follow-up plan to gain participants was acquired through avenues like Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and Google. Invite flyers and social media posters were posted on Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter to solicit candidates. Participants were provided with instructions on the nature and purpose of the investigation. The flyer included the study's purpose, participant's criteria and contact information developed specifically for this study. Participant's eligibility was verified upon the initial contact.

Further understanding of the chosen study was examined through archival databases. Historical and legal documents were obtained through archival databases as The Death Penalty Information Center and The National Registry of Exoneration. Through the person-to-person interview of the participants for this study, I collected data until saturation occurred. I thoroughly explored participant experiences and their

relationship to other concepts to become theoretically meaningful (Rudestam and Newton, 2015). This required questioning previous participants or conducting a further assessment of data sources, or drawing on new ones (Rudestam and Newton, 2015). The study progressed until no new relevant data was discovered and until the categories were well developed and proven.

Participants exiting the study were informed in lay language about the study's purpose to explore whether reentry services for the individuals wrongfully convicted and exonerated would have influenced their successful transition back into society. The debriefing process gave participants the option to receive a summary of the research results. The initial opt-in was provided at the time of signing the informed consent form. A second opportunity was provided at the debriefing. Participants was advised to email their names and address to the researcher for that purpose. Though anonymity at this time was granted, participants were reminded that their confidentiality remained preserved.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

Merriam (1988) described a general qualitative approach as seeking, discovering, and understanding an experience or the people involved perspectives and worldviews. The study's data was coded using an inductive analysis technique. The study's predetermined themes were examined during this period (Percy et al., 2015). In following the guideline of Collingridge and Gantt (2019), it was imperative to focus on the analysis of the experience. In doing so, I familiarized myself with the data collected from each participant's interview. This process involved highlighting as I read and review sentences, phrases, or statements meaningful to the study. Since the research questions

guided the study, I then decided if the highlighted data related to the research questions. All unrelated data was stored separately for forthcoming reevaluation.

The data related to the research questions was coded using a descriptor word, then clustered together to form a pattern. All patterns and direct quotes related to the study's preexisting theme was clustered together to explain the pattern. Anything else was kept separate for future evaluation as they relate to the overall topic. These steps were taken for each participant. After all participant data was collected, overall themes were noted. This step required me to combine and group the associated patterns into the preexisting themes. After examining all the data, I arranged the themes to match with the supporting patterns. I used the patterns to explain or make sense of the themes. At this stage, I revisited the unrelated patterns from the data analysis that did not meet the preexisting categories but related to the research topic. For each theme, I wrote a detailed analysis to describe the choice and element of each. Finally, I fused the themes to help address the research questions under inquiry.

Inductive coding began with close readings of text obtained from the responses of the participants. Coding was a fundamental part of qualitative research for interview data (Parameswaran et al., 2020). Coding translated the qualitative data (Saldaña, 2021). Interestingly, Charmaz's (2014) explanation of coding is that it “generates the bones of your analysis and integration assemble those bones into a working skeleton” (p.113). Once I transcribed the audio data, data analysis began. I used a Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) such as NVivo. The CAQDAS program holds the list of created codes for the research and provides the needed space to define

them, providing the opportunity to organize the codes into categories and subcategories (Saldaña, 2021). QSR NVivo is a computer-based data analysis program (Parameswaran et al., 2020). NVivo coding has been referred to as literal coding, verbatim coding, indigenous coding, natural coding, and emic coding in the literature (Saldaña, 2021). For this study's purpose, NVivo coding was used as it is the most recognized name. NVivo supports qualitative research and allowed me to collect, organize and analyze content from the interviews. The process included uploading transcripts and the audio recording and coding the transcript while I listened to the recording (Parameswaran et al., 2020). Saldaña (2021) concurs that using digital tools permits researchers to listen/watch to the recording and code the transcript simultaneously. Although the NVivo software assisted in the study's analysis aspect, it was limited in reading sense into the qualitative data that forms its foundation. As such, I tested my instincts and ideas and presented the data to justify the findings.

### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

#### **Credibility**

Credibility ensured the study measured what was intended and reflected the participants' social reality. There are appropriate strategies to establish credibility, such as triangulation, prolonged contact, member checks, saturation, reflexivity, and peer review (Maher et al., 2018). In this study, credibility was established through member checks and saturation. Credibility was established by evaluating saturation through the face-to-face interview of participants for this study until no new data emerged. Member checks was performed to validate completeness.

As credibility was based upon the participant's validation of the researchers' interpretation of the data, data was summarized after interviewing. Interviewees was allowed to review their transcription within 48 hours of the interview for accuracy. Subsequently, participants were allowed to comment on whether the categories and outcomes described in the findings related to their personal experiences (Thomas, 2006). The raw unrelated data was archived for subsequent analysis and interpretation to verify initial findings and conclusions (Lincoln et al., 1985). Suppose a further understanding of participants' reality to the experience is needed. In that case, follow-up questions were presented during that time.

To establish rigor in the general qualitative inquiry, I immersed myself in the data, explored all the possible relationships, viewed data from various perspectives, and moved from micro-to-macro view to understand exonerees stories (Maher et al., 2018). I also thoroughly explored each participant's experiences for comparison with the audio recorded files. Findings were clarified with participants and revised as more information became available.

### **Transferability**

The appropriate strategies to establish transferability, such as thick description and participant selection variation, are accessible in the study. In following the methods for general qualitative research, I disclosed the step-by-step techniques to interpret and understand how the lack of reentry services for individuals wrongfully convicted and exonerated have influenced their transition back into society (Dabengwa et al., 2020). A detailed report of the research procedures was presented to establish the study's

transferability (Caelli et al., 2003; Cooper & Endacott, 2007). The data included thick, rich, and detailed descriptions of the phenomena explaining presents, transferable contexts, and settings of the participants' experiences. Cope (2014) indicated that a qualitative study meets transferability when the research results are meaningful to persons not affected by the analysis. The researcher saw past the observable interpretations and solutions to that creative insight into the data's language.

### **Dependability**

Dependability ensured the study was described to aid another researcher in repeating the work. The appropriate strategy to establish dependability was an audit trail. I provided a transparent description of the research steps taken from the start of the research project to the development and the reporting of findings. This included the research design and data collection decisions and the steps taken to manage, analyze and report the data (Maher et al., 2018). Also included was clear information about the purposive sampling strategy and the data sources' role. Reporting also included a rationale for decisions made within the study.

The derived dependability came from the thorough recordings and transcribing of participant's experiences. The participant's data was coded so that others could grasp the themes and attain similar assumptions. All collected data is consistent with the study's argument and answers the research questions (Ravitch and Carl, 2019). I presented a thick, rich description to answer the study's core constructs and concepts from the study. According to Rudestam and Newton (2015), I considered all the complexities present in the study and deal with patterns that are not easily explained (Rudestam and Newton,

2015 p. 188). Lastly, achieving dependability was exhibited in the general qualitative design. Dependability is determined by the study's research design. (Ravitch and Carl, 2019).

### **Confirmability**

Confirmability, the qualitative counterpart to objectivity, is a degree of noninvolvement to which the study's findings are shaped by the participants and not the researcher's bias, motivation, or interest (Lincoln et al., 1985). Confirmability was established through the transparent description of the study, from the start of the research project to the development and reporting of findings (Lincoln et al., 1985; Malterud, 2001). I developed a reflexive journal, a diary, to make regular entries during the research process.

In these entries, I recorded methodological decisions and their reasons, the logistics of the study, and reflection upon what happened in terms of one's values and interests (Lincoln et al., 1985). Mann (2016) describes reflexivity as being focused on oneself and the research. Here, the most appropriate considered goal was to minimize my biases and acknowledge my predispositions. Malterud (2001) indicated that the researcher's background and perception affect what is investigated, the methods, the findings, and the framing and communication of conclusions. As researchers face ethical challenges in all stages of their study, from design to reporting (Sanjari et al., 2014), keeping a reflexive journal reduced the chances of preferences. Being relatively neutral and unambiguous without bias, I reflected on how my biases and prejudices affected data

interpretations. As the researcher of the study, I took personal notes by documenting my thoughts throughout the research process (Lincoln et al., 1985).

### **Ethical Procedures**

The study's appendix section includes agreements to gain access to participants or data that include actual documents in the IRB application. Due to research within the human population, early IRB consultation was requested to collect the needed data information within certain parameters (see Walden University Institutional Review Board, n.d.). In keeping with the ethical standards outlined, IRB proposal approval (approval number 04-12-21-0973820) was received before the commencement of the study. All ethical considerations are needed for human participants to address the research questions and minimize uneasiness and distress. Participants was informed that recruitment is voluntary without restrictions to withdraw from the study at any time. To ensure integrity in the research process, Walden University Center for Research Quality (n.d.) recommends not pressuring individuals to participate in the research.

Since personal issues could severely distress participants if framed in a judgmental, non-inclusive, dismissive, or otherwise insensitive manner, I adhered to the benevolence rule and did not cause harm to the participants (see Walden University, Center for Research Quality, n.d.). If a participant was stressed due to the interview discussions, the participant was not prohibited from discontinuing the interview. Participants were informed on the consent form about connecting with a national/state counselor for debriefing. The American Psychological Association (APA, 2020) ethics code provides specific standards for a study involving human participants. Individuals in



the study were treated humanely and was protected. As such suitable actions were taken to prevent unauthorized access to the participants' information (APA, 2020).

In compliance with IRB requirements, participants were required to sign an informed consent before partaking in the study. I discussed the type of study and the importance of informed consent with each participant. The informed consent is designed in lay terms to promote comprehension by individuals with at least an 8th-grade education. All participants received full disclosure of the type of study conducted, the study's purpose, and the study's requirements (see Moustakas, 1994). Participant privacy was protected at times. Anonymous or confidential data was identified with each participant's initial if permission is not granted to use their actual names. Any element that could disclose the identity of a participant was used. Neither the name nor any other identifying information was associated with the audio or video recording or the transcript.

Protections of confidential data continued with no one else having access to participants' data. The interview protocol and archival data was stored in a locked file cabinet in my home. Data treatment such as electronic files was stored on my password-protected laptop and backed up on a password-protected cloud drive. According to APA, 2020, researchers cannot reveal private and delicate information concerning participants. APA (2020) warns to forget details that are not an essential aspect of the study. Per IRB's ethical guidelines, all written or electronic files, audiotapes, transcripts, and documents was kept and destroyed after treatment. Research records are generally required to be maintained for five years following completion of the study. All recordings were destroyed once I received the information needed for the research.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how reentry services are provided for the individuals wrongfully convicted and exonerated and have influenced their transition back into society. The introduction conveyed the study's importance that reentry services are only provided to ex-offenders and not to wrongfully convicted and exonerated individuals. The two research questions piloted the study to get answers to what support or reentry services, if any, would have enhanced or increased the chances of a successful transition into society for individuals wrongfully convicted and exonerated? And how did a lack of reentry services associated with one's life, employment, shelter, health, and connections with family and friends influence transition back into society? The damage inflicted by the state through wrongful conviction destroys lives and requires support long after release.

My role as the researcher was to explore my own experiences and be conscious of my biases, opinions, and assumptions, utilizing bracketing during the interview process. Participants shared their stories in an in-depth, semi-structured interview guided by the research questions. The study's goal was to obtain substantial narratives of the wrongful conviction and exonerated experience under study. To provide the foundation, I used an inductive analysis approach to correspond to the general qualitative inquiry. I described and discussed the strategies taken to address the issues of trustworthiness in the study. Finally, I incorporated ethical procedures and considerations to protect the participants and the data within this chapter. Chapter 4 provides a pictorial overview of this general qualitative study's deep rich descriptive data collection and data analysis process.

## Chapter 4: Results

### **Introduction**

In the analysis to explore the reentry services of individuals wrongfully convicted and exonerated, this chapter presents the results from the interview questions asked of participants. The purpose of this general qualitative study was to explore how reentry services are provided for the individuals wrongfully convicted and exonerated and have influenced their transition back into society. The key data source for understanding the social phenomena was the participants' perspectives. The objective was to follow the two central research questions to gain insights into the reentry experience of those wrongfully convicted and exonerated as the experts of their own experiences.

The research questions that supported the objectives were:

RQ1: What support or reentry services, if any, would have enhanced or increased the chances of a successful transition into society for individuals wrongfully convicted and exonerated?

RQ2: How did a lack of reentry services associated with life, employment, shelter, health, and connections with family and friends influence the transition back into society of individuals wrongfully convicted and exonerated?

In this study, I explored the reentry of individuals wrongfully convicted and exonerated. I examined participants' experiences through a general qualitative method. According to Percy et al. (2015), this design is appropriate for bringing truth and reality to a study and receiving newly constructed knowledge from the participants and the generated data. The characteristics of the participants that are relevant to the study are

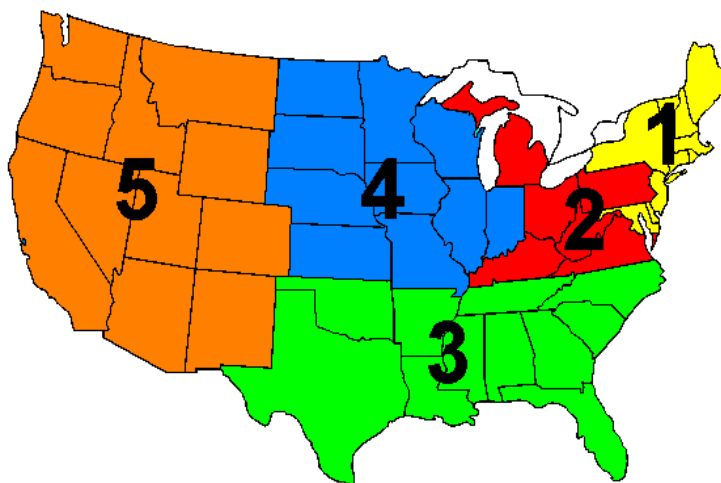
displayed in the demographic sections. The qualitative research allowed me to provide an overview of the phenomenon through the data collection and present a rich description of the research. The data collection section of my study serves as a manual for future replication of the study. In the data analysis, I describe the methods and procedures of the coding categories and themes that emerged from the data. I present evidence of trustworthiness to show credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability in the overall study. Finally, Chapter 4 concludes with a summary of the findings of the research.

### **Setting**

The study was conducted in Orlando, Florida, from April 28, 2021, to July 14, 2021. The participants were recruited from within the United States. As a result of the Covid pandemic, the virtual platform was used to ensure the safety of participants and the researcher. On April 12, 2021, the IRB approved the virtual setting for the face-to-face meeting of interviews. None of the participants desired to speak with a counselor.

### **Demographics**

Participants were adult males between the age of 29 and 52 years old. Participants identified themselves as Hispanic ( $n = 2$ ) and Black ( $n = 6$ ) adult males. Participants were exonerated 2 years or less during 2019 and 2021, with the latest exoneration occurring in February 2021. Figure 2 depicts the regions that are representative of participants' exoneration in the United States.

**Figure 1***Participant's Exoneration Region*

1. RF04282021- Region - 2
2. JD06282021- Region - 1
3. EA06192021- Region - 4
4. MC07112021- Region - 4
5. TL05242021- Region - 1
6. KN07142021-Region - 4
7. KH07272021-Region - 4
8. LS0730202 -Region - 4

Table 2 provides collective data on participants' demographic information. The sample consisted of eight adult male interviewees with exonerations from across the United States of America.

**Table 2***Participant's Demographics*

| Demographic Category                       | n |
|--|---|
| Age at time of arrest                      |   |
| 10-14                                      |   |
| 15-19                                      | 3 |
| 20-24                                      | 5 |
| 25 Above                                   |   |
| Current age/category                       |   |
| 18-25                                      |   |
| 26-35                                      | 2 |
| 36-45                                      | 4 |
| 46-55                                      | 2 |
| 56-64                                      |   |
| 65 & older                                 |   |
| Highest completed grade/level of education |   |
| 8 <sup>th</sup> - below grade              |   |
| 9 <sup>th</sup> - 10 <sup>th</sup>         | 4 |
| 11 <sup>th</sup> -12 <sup>th</sup>         |   |
| Some college                               | 4 |
| Associate                                  |   |
| Bachelors                                  |   |
| Masters                                    |   |
| Race                                       |   |
| African American/Black                     | 6 |
| White                                      |   |
| American Indian or Alaska Native           |   |
| Asian                                      |   |
| Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander        |   |
| Hispanic or Latino                         | 2 |
| Employed                                   |   |
| Yes  | 3 |
| No   | 4 |
| full-time                                  | 1 |
| part-time                                  |   |
| occasional work                            |   |
| looking for work                           | 2 |
| Years incarcerated                         |   |
| 1-10                                       | 1 |
| 10-20                                      | 3 |
| 20-30                                      | 4 |
| 30 above                                   |   |
| Time Exonerated                            |   |
| Under 1 year                               | 6 |
| 1 Year                                     | 1 |
| 2 Years                                    | 1 |

### **Data Collection**

Data was not collected until Walden's IRB approved the application. Once approval was obtained, data collection began. I used the following criteria to select participants: adult males released from a U.S. state or federal prison who were wrongfully convicted and exonerated for 2 years or less. Participants were located through social media like Instagram, professional referrals, and the snowball method. Before the interview, participants were informed about the anonymity of the research and the use of their name initials and the interview date as identifiers. Although the participants preferred their identities to be known, I did not disclose actual names. Still, I used initials and interview dates as identifiers. I interviewed seven participants for no more than 60 minutes, but not less than 30 minutes. One participant, however, was interviewed for 75.25 minutes. This participant stated that the interview was therapeutic for him. Data were collected from eight participants. The eight participants were enough to achieve data saturation. Data saturation was met with four participants; however, further analysis was conducted for maximum variation in the experience of the phenomenon.

I used open-ended questions, which allowed rich, descriptive understandings of the participants' experiences. I conducted the interviews in the participant's private residence and recorded the information through the Zoom recording feature. To back up the retrieved data, I also used an alternative recorder. I listened to each recording several times to transcribe and authenticate the participant's experience verbatim. I read each transcript obtained through NVivo transcription and then reread them to validate the

accuracy of the data. The transcript was then imported into NVivo for coding and further analysis.

The study was presented without variation in data collection from the plan presented in Chapter 3. Participants were allowed to contact me if they were interested in the study. At each interview, I used reflexive journaling to note my impressions. No unusual circumstances were encountered in data collection. As previously mentioned, the COVID-19 pandemic has forced the world to adhere to social distancing guidelines. The COVID-19 pandemic guidelines, however, provided an opportunity to use technology to interview participants where person-to-person contact would have normally been administered. There were no other unusual circumstances encountered in this study.

### **Data Analysis**

I used a Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) such as NVivo. The CAQDAS program holds the list of created codes for the research. It provides the needed space to define them, providing the opportunity to organize the codes into categories and subcategories (Saldaña, 2021). QSR NVivo is a computer-based data analysis program (Parameswaran et al., 2020). NVivo coding has been referred to as literal coding, verbatim coding, indigenous coding, natural coding, and emic coding in the literature (Saldaña, 2021). For this study's purpose, the NVivo coding name was used as it is the most recognized name. NVivo supported the qualitative research and allowed me to collect, organize, and analyze the content from the interviews.

I reviewed my research questions and approach to move inductively from coded units to larger representations of categories and themes. I wrote summary memos for each



transcript. I wrote up key issues from the interviews and the initial broad coding strategy from my research journal. Coding from a thematic analysis made me conscious of some initial codes; however, other codes were developed in an emergent way. I then developed a word cloud to get acquainted with what was covered in each code and to guide the data's story. Here are some codes to themes that materialized from the interviews. The verbatim quotes expressed from participants RF04282021, JD06282021, EA06192021, MC07112021, TL05242021, KN07142021, KH07272021, and LS07302021 are the data collectively obtained through the open-ended and conversational communication during each interview. The word “they” expressed by participants was used in relative to “the state, and or the government.”

### **A Person's life**

Life after a lifetime in prison is difficult. EA06192021 explained, “I just worry a lot because life is so much to get into. And I worry about like everything being perfect and I really think I've just lost my patience.” LS07302021 shared, [I]f you don't know what it feels like to be housed or held in shackles, chained and leg irons with them all buckled together at one time, and then to be placed in somewhere where it supposed to be six people, and it is thirteen of you all, and then you got to use the bathroom. Like, I just some of this stuff would be difficult to do. The trauma that's associated with the experience make it difficult to do some of these things out here that they want you to do. And then, I think I'm slow and I don't catch on. MC07112021 added,

I didn't sleep for the first two or three weeks or so knowing that you might have told yourself we have you on the street, but you really don't feel happiness. You don't feel sad or feel bad. You know better. You don't feel anything because you've been in Prison for so long. You've been fighting for so long, you've been denied for so long, that to finally get aware that you've been looking for it, you really don't know how to commit to it. So, it was actually pretty hard for me to. Oh, I was seeing family of friends that I haven't seen in years. Some of them, you know, you know, 20 years, they're crying and they're so excited and inside, I couldn't feel how they were feeling. But after, like two or three weeks, I started to get that feeling back. So that whole experience is so overwhelming of that complete change. The reality is so overwhelming that it takes months, if not years, to actually catch up to the moment. There are still parts of ourselves internally that we haven't caught up to yet. Some things that we need to catch up with, you know, our humanity is coming back, you know, being in touch with emotions and our feelings and the world is still coming back. We don't fear you, don't fear the system. You don't fear. You know, we've seen the worst of the system we fought with the worst. You've been in the worst environment, and we survived, and now we're out here. And you know, we're not just surviving we're thriving. When you first get out, the last thing you don't have is patience to sit still and deal with ... You don't want to fill out the applications.

RF04282021 further shared, "I come to reality that night when I sat here with myself and I say, you know what? Nothing's going to change unless you make a change for the better." TL05242021 concluded with what most, if not all the participants felt sharing, "But nonetheless, I have been victimized. I have, you know, I wear the wounds. I got my

life and I'm trying to put the pieces back together. I've been robbed of you know, certain development.”

### **Shelter**

Regarding shelter challenges, JD06282021 said, Whenever you don't know where you're going to lay your head then, you can't think about no lesson, no studying. I'm doing interviews all over the world, and after the interviews at night, I'm crying. Being in a shelter, being at a halfway house, you are still at the mercy of the system, because now they put you in a room with a number of other guys. If they clean up and find any contraband in the common area. I am getting violated along with the guilty party. Oh, how is that! how was that justice?

KH07272021 stated, “So, I stayed in a hotel room for a while. Before I found my, you know, a dwelling actually.” KN07142021 shared his housing experience.

I'm staying with my girlfriend, so we already had a place to go. I didn't have a housing issues. I've had a few guys that have come home to nothing. Some guys who live in hotels and guys where there's a guy right now, luckily for a donor he was able to get six months worth of rent for an apartment. He doesn't have anywhere to go. If it weren't for that donation, he'd be on somebody's couch right now, like all of his family passed away. All of his friends passed away. He came home to no one.

LS07302021's shelter experience was different. He explained his challenges and shared his frustrations.

Right now, I'm still trying to find an apartment right now. If I get an apartment, they said they will reimburse me the money. But where am I supposed to get the money to pay for

it? You know it's all, it's all I mean, like, I don't know how to tell you. It just seems like it's a gag, man. You put me through hell. You send me to that place, you dragged me by my face with my nose into the ground like I was a puppy who took a poop, and then you put me out here and you stick my nose in it, further. If it wasn't for my family, my mother, my, my, my friend, my, my, my, my daughter support then, I would just be out here. No, I could call the prosecutor's office and I can say something to them, but if I am hungry? I don't know if they will give me something to eat. you know. I've been telling them I need some place to stay for days and days and days. They ain't got me some where to stay.

The significance of housing was provided by MC07112021.

Housing would be next. Housing is immediately. This should be immediately coming out the door after you've done 20 years, 30 years, 40 years in prison, most of your family have died off and the ones that are still here and the relationship that you've built have been strained. We come out homeless or we live off of the blessings of someone else. I found a landlord that didn't, he didn't even care about ID, you got the money. OK, so it worked out for me, but it does not work out for everybody. Housing is very hard to get. It takes several months for them to actually clear your name. But you may be released. The conviction may be vacated, but it takes several months. We don't have any credit. You know, we don't have any history, history, so getting any housing is very difficult.

RF04282021 agreed stating, "I put in for housing and I put in for everything that I'm entitled to. I haven't heard back from nobody on it." TL05242021 stated,

There was nothing in place for individual wrongfully convicted with the help of housing. I was fortunate enough to have a family to lend me a couch. Nothing in place, no halfway house system, you know, no reintegration, you know, type building to help you, you know, is zero. So, unless you are blessed with a tight knit family, loved one, a friend...If you're dependent on the state and depending on the state that they live in and most is at this point, the essence is, they will be homeless. You've got to go wherever there's room.

## **Health**

Several participants told of their struggles to get health care. KH07272021 said, To get with Medicaid, you've got to file something to keep the Medicaid. LS07302021 stated, they gave you an insurance card. I been to the doctor twice. I've been home six months. MC07112021 explained how it took a lot of months to get health care. That is another big thing after being release. Everything is so difficult to somebody that hasn't done it at all, so it takes some getting used to, but yeah, insurance is very difficult to get. And so, a lot of the money get ate up pretty quick. And then they cut off insurance, now you have to pay full insurance that, you know, it's just like everything is just a set up. With money in mind opposed to actually leveling the playing field for somebody that was put at a disadvantage. We should have never been put at this disadvantage. TL05242021 stated I was fortunate enough to have a friend who actually worked in the Social Services Department who helped me navigate and access the medical services.

Regarding mental health, EA06192021 shared,

Mentally, my problem is that I probably worry too much. I mean, In there, everything slow. All you do is see and think about what you're asked. Doing what they did? Which

it was really taking away time that we got. They all, they all sound like it's just things that people actually do on a day basis. It's slow because you ain't got nothing else to do with it. Except, to think about why somebody ain't getting free. Yeah. As opposed to being out here, it is super-fast. I just worry a lot because life is so much to get into, and I worry about like everything being perfect, and I really think I've just lost my patience.

JD06282021 said, "After 29 years with all those experiences, if I look you in the eye and tell you I'm 100% good, I'll be lying to you. I would be lying to you."

KH07272021 explained how mentally you are scarred by the justice system.

Basically, they behind you for almost half your life, in terms of, you would die in prison. So that's a lot of scar tissue, you know what I mean? A lot of issues, you really cannot sleep. It will catch you antsy, ready to get to the next day. You got anxiety from dealing with all that stuff.

KN07142021 shared about his therapeutic experience.

This is my first time ever being actually in therapy or anything. But at first, it's sort of at first when I went into it, I was like, hey, why not? The state's paying for it. So, I ran up the bill as much as I possibly can with it. When I started doing it, it actually turned out to be a good thing. So, yeah, I've been in it since probably like two weeks after I came home. Nothing affects me a lot emotionally, but it's a product of being inside. You don't really, it doesn't directly affect you, then who the hell cares? So, I think I brought that mentality home with me a bit.

LS07302021's experience was different as he shared,

I talked to one psych one time. They never called me back, ever again. I take it one day at a time, and then every time I just think about it, I think how somebody else is less fortunate than me. This is a reality, someone less fortunate than me. I got an opportunity and a voice to speak up on my behalf. So, that's what I do. Every time I think about torture, I think about pain. I think about our experience. I think of our talking to the end. Being in segregation not showering for over 5 months. When I think about that type of stuff, I just think about, OK, I got it. If you, if you don't know what it feels like to be housed or held in shackles, chained and leg irons with them all buckled together at one time. And then to be placed in somewhere where it supposed to be six people, and it is thirteen of you all, and then you got to use the bathroom. Like, I just, some of this stuff, would be difficult to do. The trauma that's associated with the experience make it difficult to do some of these things out here that they will want you to do.

MC07112021 noted,

There are still parts of ourselves internally that we haven't caught up to yet. We don't fear you don't fear the system. You don't fear. You know, we've seen the worst of the system we fought with the worst you've been in the worst environment, and we survived and now we're out here. And, you know, we're not just surviving we're thriving. They told me they were going to pay for therapy, and they haven't. The number one thing, and I believe all exonerees need coming out, you know, a lot of people sometimes feel like they don't need that. But we need to be able to debrief. So, therapy is so important in it. And I think the state should provide that before, like, immediately. I think we should be able to walk right out the door, and that should be available to us, like the next day if if if we choose

it. Leaving out of the house is so hard it takes me hours to get ready and just leave. It just means... I can be ready and I'm triple checking everything, checking my pockets and everything. It is so hard to just leave. They contract out with therapists, and counselors all of the time. It would be nothing for them to either allow me to pick the counselor that I want to talk to or for them to provide a list of counselors they already have, you know, that would be like a small fix.

RF04282021 said,

As far as my mind, I've always been pretty much at rest with that. I have that part under control. I have never seen a doctor in there. And I believe I don't have to see one now. But if something changes, I will put in for it. I came home, and... I believe my dad was a forty something, I get out... you know, he can barely remember things, and you know, it really took me to the point. When I came home after saying hello to all my family members, I went to the room and just turned off the light, and I probably cried for two hours.

TL05242021, also shared about his mentality:

My psych is different now because I had an order in my head, you know, saying that I was innocent, but that meant nothing. But, you know, experiencing what was experienced on that side in regards to, you know, the trauma and the PTSD, you know, to suffer, that was a journey you know, walking through that and trying to walk through it unscathed, you know, to hold on to your mental when you know... just your natural disposition. I mean it hurts, and it damages, you know, it's an extended period of time. I'm talking, I'm a voice right now for, again, I have the least amount of time from my state. I did 21 and a



half years. You have individuals that did 30, 35 years on a wrongful conviction and came home to what I came home to, which was zero. That's wrong. I've been robbed of you know, certain development. Regarding challenges with physical health, EA06192021 indicated, I think now I feel like I've had no problems physically. KH07272021 stated, physically, I am ok. KN07142021, my physical health was fine, which is, you know, why the Medicaid card came into play because I want to go on to account for everything like physical. I want to get checked out for everything that I possibly could and Medicaid to pay for it. That was one of my first tasks as I came home.

Not all the participants experienced good physical health upon reentry:

JD06282021 shared,

I joined the gym to be able to keep my blood sugar level balanced, you know, so I want to reduce the weight I could. My blood sugar level won't be that high. Health care is needed when the person come out of prison. They need a full checkup.

LS07302021 explained, "They told me I'm prediabetic. I guess that came from the diet that they prescribe me in prison, so now I got to go through all this stuff in order to keep my health in order." MC07112021 elaborated,

So, most of us come out pretty healthy. So, except for having high blood pressure for 11 years, when I was incarcerated, and when I was released. After a couple of months, it went down so low, they had to give me something to bring it back up. So, so, obviously my blood pressure was high because I was in prison for something I didn't do.

RF04282021 further added,

I went in and got checked for physical because, you know, in that place there's people with hepatitis, you know, all type of stuff, it's basically anything. You could pick up a pencil, and get something, you never know. So, I went and got checked.

### **The State**

Participants expressed their frustrations in dealing with state agencies. EA06192021 stated, I really don't want nothing to do with the Department of Corrections. Every time I think about torture, I think about pain. I think about our experience. I think of our talking to the end. Being in segregation not showering for over 5 months. I never got one thing from the state. So, if there could be programs maybe the state perhaps can subcontract to organizations and take the stigma name off it because nobody's rushing to be a part of a state anything, as being in a state prison world, wrongfully. They contract out with therapists and counselors all the time. It would be nothing for them to either allow me to pick a counselor that I want to talk to or for them to provide a list of counselors they already have, that would be a small fix. They put us back into the world with nothing. I am wrongfully convicted and now I am out, and the State is throwing their hands in the air saying, that we're not responsible for you.

According to MC07112021, we all agrees and acknowledge that, you know, this individual has been and become a victim of a failed system, a political system or whatever you want to call, a rigged system. They told me they were going to pay for therapy, and they haven't. You may have two/three days for release, they have time to do something for us. They take us away, you know, convicted us, then put us backout into the world with nothing. TL05242021 added,

They need to give me a public apology, just like how they humiliate me in public. They need to apologize in public. Apology, a public apology. Just like the public humiliation they put you through. They need to do some public apologies. The state hasn't formally apologized because you know, they know that there may be future litigation, so they may not want to apologize. They get their money before you even get your money. Oh yeah, so the state really has no responsibility because after you sue a city which has nothing to do with the state, the state takes their money back. Even 20 million dollars, you know, is not a sufficient amount to put on a person's life. Even though the state was the ones that let us out, the same state is going to hire lawyers to try to make it seem like we were never supposed to be out to begin with. This is crazy! So, they walk away having harmed you for 20, 30, years and they actually pay no price. They need to try to make you whole... which they could do. That's individual based. That's real restitution.

KN07142021 whispered, I can't get it. If they got some secret type of machine or something to take me back into the past or skip my human events that took place in my family lives. The ones I was supposed to be present for, and I just ain't talking about the deaths. I'm going to even say, like... bring me back to let me talk to my grandmother or to get some of her wisdom. I live in a racist country. Our country is really racist, truthfully speaking. Due to the laws, the federal law and state was set up completely draconian. Designed to keep you enslaved, and in prison. You put yourself in my shoes and what would you want? So, even though the fight for our freedom is over, now it's just a whole other fight. It is more difficult now, because you know, we were thrown into

a whole new environment and you know, we need help... like right now! But, we got to fight months and years for it. The government have a responsibility for that.

LS07302021 related to the other participants and stated, Every time we file an appeal, the governor's name is on there. They're opposing us! Even though it was an agency of the government that released us! We lost everything and wasn't able to build a life because of the government's case against us, you know. So, what responsibilities do they have? Just a real generous gesture that I'm truly sorry? Sorry! So, you should never have to worry again for the rest of your life? I mean, at least, as this is your retirement. They take us away wrongfully, then they put us back out into the world with nothing. So, it puts a burden on the families, you know? So, the compensation? We can start there. That can be used as a band aid, a soothing band-aid to allow an individual to cope with whatever they need now for the rest of their life. They play you like they looking out for you, but ... what I'm saying is, there are basic aspect of the dollar. You build your home, your health care, your 401k, your pension, your acquired furniture, all these different things you acquire all the years.... They going to give me some money, and I'm supposed to go buy these things? So, what's that going to do for my health care when I'm over 65? What is that going to do for me, to be able to do for myself when I'm over 65? Nobody not considering the ramifications of what's taking place. No, not sorry! I think that we need assistance, we need financial assistance out the gate. We need the mental health, when a person come out, they supposed to provide allowance, and they are supposed to give us somewhere to stay. They just can't kick a person out into society or put them in

somebody's backyard or somebody's living room and they just say, it's okay. Because if we ain't got a place to stay, or then we are homeless.

### **Family**

The participants collectively agreed on the significance of having connections with family and friends during and post incarceration. EA06192021 shared, "I got a strong support system. They provided financial and shelter." JD06282021 added, "The biggest support right there." KH07272021 further noted, "Everything, family, and friends, that's everything." KN07142021 stated,

Oh, lots of emotional support, financial support, materialistic support. A car. I had a lot of support the entire time I was gone, and when I came home, housing, and I had a better start than a lot of people did. I can openly admit that I didn't really need a lot from the state, but I definitely took everything they were offering.

TL05242021 shared how important his family and friends were:

I was blessed to have my family, and I had friends that I still you know, that was in my corner. I got a starting point or as you know, a foundation. Some I know individuals who came home with nothing. Fortunately for me, that I always have always had, you know, family, some family and some friends did all the work with me to my journey, those who are passed away from my wrongful incarceration. So, the same support that they gave me when I was incarcerated was the same identical support that I received.

RF04282021 explained his family and friends' connection.

I am currently staying with my brother and his family. I am striving to get to a place. My family came through for me, every which way. They came from gathering for me money,

housing and everything, anything, and everything. Shopping, going here and taking care of my health, just getting checked, doing everything. Nothing has come through yet. everything they put in for, as far as the assistance wise, and nothing was ever given to me, anything that I got came from myself, and from my family. MC07112021 expressed, it's still a problem that we face. I'm telling you, if it wasn't for a good people that, we know maybe some friends and maybe some family, probably all of us will be in a bad situation. I had a friend that gave me let me use his car for a few weeks, gave me one of his extra cars. You know, I received I received a lot of money, and I was taken shopping and grocery shopping and people bringing food to the hotel. I had a few people tried to force me out in a hotel of you know, I was offered a place to stay. But I don't want to be, for lack of a better word, I want to be somebody's sex slave because I lived in their house. And so, I passed up on a few of that, you know, and I probably would have been comfortable, but I didn't want to be subjected. You know, and I don't want to be living in somebody's house based on circumstantial circumstances. You know, I don't want to victimize myself because of my circumstances, right. Maybe victim is a strong word, yeah, but if it wasn't for the blessings of people, just, you know, that money came in handy. Lastly, staying with family can come with a price as LS07302021 related, I'm staying with family and boy that can be something, but I would be ass out of luck. Somebody let me, use a car so, I can have transportation. People provided me, let me do odd jobs. They helped me out so, I can have gas money, and be able to take care of myself.

## **Employment**

Employment was another barrier to successful reentry EA06192021 articulated, “I worked for 45 days, but they had a strike and they laid everybody off. I felt like I was going to follow certain rules. My supervisors felt like correctional officers.” JD06282021 stated, they're asking me about my credit. The job wants to know about my credit score. You got all of these things on the computer, on the Internet, but they want us to do this just coming out of the system after so many years, that's not fair.

KN07272021's transition was difficult. He shared,

It was difficult because I didn't realize at the time that the conviction still shows up in your background. There's a process that must take place before it comes out, comes on. So, I apply for a couple of jobs. And to my surprise, the background check came up. And, you know, when it did, I had to contest it, and show proof of documentation for the jobs to verify. It was a bit unnerving to know that I had been exonerated, and this was still showing up.

LS07302021 voiced,

They worked me like a slave for 17 some hours, sometimes 54 a day. I got out here and I applied for Social Security, I mean, unemployment. They told me I couldn't get it, even though they worked me like a slave inside of prison. They told me they had exceptions to the rule. They shoot me down and tell me that I because I was in prison, I'm not entitled because I was in prison. And I'm saying, what do you mean? You worked me like a slave. You work as a slave. You work as a slave. Under the 13th Amendment of the United States Constitution, you work me under Article nine of the state Constitution. You work

me as a slave, and then you tell me I am not at least entitled to unemployment? After I bust my ass for you people like, that ain't fair. That is not fair. Not at all. A lot of these places, I can go and work in these places. If they say some crazy stuff to me, I'm a walk out, and I don't want to produce a history of walking out of people. That ain't my thing. It is just that, I ain't going to let these people talk to me any kind of way.

MC07112021 stated, "I'm a motivational speaker and I do a lot of community social justice advocacy work." TL05242021 explained,

When I first came home, I was fortunate enough to land a job. I worked at a homeless shelter. I was able to work at a homeless shelter and that there was word of mouth, but I didn't have a chance. I didn't have the opportunity to, I guess, any training program to help me look for job assistance.

### **Accountability**

KN07142021 requested,

For them to leave me the hell alone. I haven't heard an apology from anybody. But at the same time, I didn't expect one either. I didn't expect it. I wasn't looking for it. I don't care. And I got my freedom back. We don't never have to say anything to each other ever again in life. We can sit in the same room and say anything to each other, and I'd be totally fine with it. Just so I wasn't looking for it. No, they haven't offered it. KH07272021 stated, Apology, a public apology. Just like the public humiliation they put you through. They need to do some public apologies. They need to try to make your whole. whatever? Which they could do that. Which is a bit individual based, try to make that right. That's real. That's real restitution.



LS07302021 expressed,

When I was in prison, I clicked my heels three times and turned around in a circle and said, there's no place like home. So, I'm probably going to be so far-fetched with my answer. What it is, because when they tell me sorry, what? Sorry, sorry, sorry, sorry. You know, I said what they're going to do. Sorry that ain't going to do nothing. I apologize that ain't going to do nothing. So, we don't even need that. We need we need opportunity. Where I don't got to bust my ass and I can spend time with my daughter, I can spend time with my grandchildren, you know, we need the type of stuff we need somewhere to be. We need food. We need all the type of same shit that they need. They should provide us with. Twenty-seven years. I didn't get to stack that stuff up. That's the thing, people think, oh, they're going to give you a million dollars. When I went to prison, a bag of chips in a pack was a dollar. When I came out of prison, I pay seven dollars for two packs. That's the same size pop I paid a dollar for. So now, when I go into the store and I buy this bag of chips I bought in 1994, that was a quarter that bag of chips now is a dollar, and they give you two for a dollar. They play you like they looking out for you, but what I'm saying is, there are basic aspect of the dollar. You build your home, your health care, your 401K, your pension, your acquired furniture, all these different things you acquire all the years, they tell me at forty-five, forty-six, they going to give me some money, and I supposed to go buy these things. So, what that's going to for my health care when I'm over 65? What is that going to do for me to be able to do myself when I'm over 65? Nobody not considering the ramifications of what's taking place. No, not sorry. I think I think that we need assistance, we need we need financial assistance out of the gate. You

need the mental health, mental health aspect when a person come out, they supposed to provide allowance and they are supposed to give us somewhere to stay. It just can't kick a person out to society or put them in somebody's backyard or somebody's living room.

And they just say, oh yeah, because if we ain't got that, then we homeless.

RF04282021 shared his challenges,

So, I have to get the job to make my way back into society. I must do it myself. I can't depend on the state because the state not doing nothing for me. I never got one thing from the state, and now I'm out. And it's a pandemic in this. Absolutely. I'm stuck. I know people have been out here working for years. They don't got a job. So, you know, I'm coming out of this situation right now. Bottom of the food chain. I would want them to compensate me for the time that I spent while in that jail. They give me an apology and really, they apologize to me for the time I spent in jail.

TL05242021 suggested,

You put yourself in my shoes and what would you want? It's something, you know, as you know, just a real generous gesture that I'm truly sorry. Sorry. So, you should never have to worry again for the rest of your life. I mean, at least as this is your retirement.

## **Worlds**

The participants shared their views and challenges of being in two different worlds:

JD06282021 exclaimed,

An innocent person wrongfully to break into that system, that person now has to navigate and learn how to navigate in the world, that doesn't forgive that. That's a different world.

Dog-Eat-Dog, in that world that you have to decide who are you going to run with, the

wolves or the sheep? But to see that the sheep are again eaten. If you want me to be successful, don't kick me out in the world that I don't know to swim or sink.KH07272021 stated,

Trying to confront that with the new world. Figuring out what you like, what you don't like. You know, and also to try to help others that is still in the same fight that you were in with services, programs, you know, to help you get adjusted back to a whole world.

MC07112021 added that even though the state was the ones that let us out, now the same state is going to hire lawyers to try to make it seem like you was never supposed to be out to begin with. This is crazy. It is more difficult now because, you know, we were thrown into a whole new environment and, you know, we need help like right now, but we got to fight months and years for it.

TL05242021 shared his views stating,

I'm like, damn, I just come from a different world, you know, for an extended period of time. The streets wouldn't change. The world is different, you know. Like I said, unless you have a caring spouse or if you have someone in your family that they're not mentally damaged, or then it's just another, you know, a strenuous journey to navigate through a world, just like on this side of the fence. In that world, you have to decide who you are going to run with, the wolves or the sheep.

### **Programs/Services**

Participants expressed the programs and services that would enhance a successful transition into society.

EA06192021 expressed,

“Assistance on housing and health care, and what to... Just guidance in the in the right direction, to whatever we need.” JD06282021 stated, nobody never told me about any support services. When I came out, nobody never told me, you know, you must get on the phone, and start looking at trying to find out anything. You need transportation to move around, to get a job. You need money for that transportation to get a job. All right, it’s key to reintegration. They need to be implemented on your way out. Services is supposed to be already set up when you get out. You already have a job, being that they demand the need to have a job.

KH07272021 shared his experience.

It was, you know, no resource, no help at all. When you're convicted, you have less resources than someone being parole out from the state. It’s more organized. You know, someone has been wrongly convicted, they need to have more organization. That's kind of like what we're doing now. So, the transition could be a little bit smoother for people coming in and out this.

KN07142021 indicated,

They told me eventually that, you know, I would be given the same services as the people on parole. Just not as stringent as the people on parole. I think I was like one of the first people that came out of that where they had access to those services. So, I was able to get help with like the setup for like food assistance. Stuff like that, but beyond that, that was it. When I was released, they gave me a folder and it had my Medicaid card.

LS07302021 shared his difficult experience.

They didn't do nothing. Right now, I've been trying, to just simply get help to get somewhere to stay. They did nothing. They did nothing. Absolutely not. What they got? What are they offering? I don't want nobody to come to me and offer me a job. To give me ten dollars cash under the table. We know that when I'm 65, how am I going to use that in order to retire since I've been out of prison? I was displaced by the pandemic prior to coming out of prison, I caught COVID.

MC07112021 vented his experience.

We just went through a traumatic experience, and we need to be able to debrief and just get it off of us and talk to somebody just neutral so, therapy is so important in it. Housing is immediately. This should be immediately coming out the door after you've done 20 years, 30 years, 40 years in prison, most of your family have died off, and the ones that are still here, the relationship that you've built have been strained. When exonerees come home, it is usually other exonerees who give them money for underwear, socks, and drive them around. You know, we spend hours and hours just transporting those of us. So, if there could be programs, maybe the state perhaps subcontract that to organizations and take the stigma name from it because nobody's rushing to be in a state anything, as being in a state prison world wrongfully. It took a lot of months to get health care, there is another big thing after being release. We don't know how to do that, but when you were locked up, you know, you get locked up so young, you really don't know how to navigate those things. And there's nobody to sit around waiting to show us how to do it. It should be a separate division of maybe a social worker to actually help set that up, opposed to just somebody answering your call. even though the state was the ones that let us out,

know the same state is going to hire lawyers to try to make it seem like it was never supposed to be out to begin with. This is crazy. So even though the fight for our freedom is over now, it's just a whole other fight. It is more difficult now because, you know, we were thrown into a whole new environment and, you know, we need help like right now, but we got to fight months and years for it.

RF04282021 expressed,

They said I could apply to the State for assistance and help. They gave me food stamps. Two things came across, and that is they gave me food stamps and they gave me medical assistance. Housing, Food. And some type of support system. They put in for you before you can leave the institution for the Food Stamps.

Those things are the two main criteria things: medical check and my health and as far as food stamps, housing. Those things, right there are essential in someone getting out of the situation like that you're waking up from a nightmare, but that if I had three things that would be it health, food stamps and housing at least I could have gotten started at that point.

TL05242021 shared,

That there were no reentry services told to me that will be in place when I returned specifically in the state of Pennsylvania and in most places, many other places in a nation that Pennsylvania is one of the 15 states that don't offer any type of reentry or compensation services for those who have been wrongfully convicted or injured or by the state or by the city. And there were none. I was being exonerated and there are no services provided for an exonerated. You know, you got to be on parole.

You get no help and support. If you still want parole, we still have a leash on you. And yeah, we give you we still mandated to give you free housing for a year and a half. You get six months, and you renew it, and you get another six months, you renew it. So, you get a year and a half, and you get vouchers for his clothing and for food vouchers.

#### Support to Enhance Transition

EA06192021 I really and housed in some kind of financial support for sake, one of the one of the major issues might be that, you know, people have a place to live.

I would say like housing, finance, a place to stay at the same time. That same family member still needs you to pay bills and all that. Definitely, the housing aspect. May be mental health. JD06282021 stated in order to be able to put into words that readers can feel the pain of the wrongfully convicted, when they are thrown outside into society to their fate. Left there, to survive or die.

KH07272021 shared that having different funds available or necessities or having different options now available. You need your driver's license birth certificate. When you come out of there you don't you don't have. It's a trying time. I think someone's being wrongly convicted. They need to have everything at work by the time they release them. I mean, you know, this is already a difficult emotional time being released under that type of scrutiny and pressure. So, they need to have things in place services, programs, you know, to help you get adjusted back to a whole world. KN07142021 added that they didn't have all of your vital documents. It allows you to open doors that otherwise would be closed without them. LS07302021 further stated, number one, when a guy came out, he got natural life. He's been in prison for 12 years. You got to have you somewhere to

stay, somewhere to stay, food, you know, any clothes and stuff like that to, you know, mattress and bed. Number one is you got to make sure he got somewhere to stay. They they're not doing that. When you ask me about the services, housing, cash, credit, they should at least provide us with some credit. They know they've got to give me some money at some point. So, why wouldn't you give me a hundred thousand dollars' worth of credit from the jump. Just say, hey, we've got to give you this shit anyway. We did you dirty. We did you bad. We step on you for years. So, here you go.

MC07112021 indicated,

That the very first obstacle is getting I'D. Getting the birth certificate, getting social security card, because when somebody is released on parole. The state has made and prepared it for them ahead of time. But when you were exonerated, you had three days two days. government money for release, you may have two or three days. They don't have time to do anything. So, we usually spend the next three months trying to get a driver's license, get a bank account, get a birth certificate, social security card, and that it's so difficult because you can't do anything else until you get those basic dates of order. Housing would be next. Housing is immediately. This should be immediately coming out the door after you've done 20 years, 30 years, 40 years in prison, most of your family have died off and the ones that are still here and the relationship that you've built have been strained.

States should have emergency money that they can immediately issue for housing and food and clothes and underwear. When exonerees come home, it is usually other exonerees who give them money for underwear socks and drive them around. You know,



we spend hours and hours just transporting those of us. Relationship's network. We're doing it ourselves. I don't know how the state will possibly put together a network that will be good. You've been locked up in a state prison, and due to the state's actions, the last thing you want is to be made or even suggest doing something that the state wants you to do. You know, we're turned off by the state, especially immediately at the release. And that will increase a person's chance of survival, you know, it took a lot of months to get health care, there is another big thing after being release.

RF04282021 stated, "some type of assistance as far as living is necessary. As far as a job is concern, housing, food. And some type of support system." TL05242021 expressed, I think services such as counseling, you know, having someone or something, some type of program set up to help you reintegrate back into society. Like I said, you know, the counseling or some reentry type programs even to help assist them with jobs or help them get back to perhaps, I mean, to the education with school. And that's nonexistent.

Housing, employment, you know, just to throw. I personally wish that I had received the housing on the job. I just having somebody on standby, at least in place, if I wanted to utilize, I wanted to do without, you know, considering, you know, I'm not saying I want a pity party, but I want the option. I want the option to have, you know, that debt in place in regards that person that you can call, you know, help figure it out, because other than that, you be lost and or dependent upon someone that may not know the right way.

### **Identification**

Not having identification or access to identification created more barriers for participants. They share their challenges. LS07302021 relate, I had to get it. I had to get home. I had to

in order to get a driver's license because they kept saying, I ain't exist. Everything they say, I don't exist. I don't exist. No, that's the whole thing. They say I don't exist. So that's what caused the difficulty, no damage, right? This what I was dealing with.

The challenge continues with KN07142021he explains,

I think if I had to ask anything from the government, it would be access to proper identification. That was the biggest, most frustrating hurdle of it all. You cannot get an apartment; you cannot do anything without identification. Definitely, they didn't have all your vital documents. It allows you to open doors that otherwise would be closed without them. You can't get a driver's license, without a birth certificate. You can't get a birth certificate, without a social security card. You can't get an ID, without a social security card or a birth certificate. So, it was very, very difficult for me to navigate that process, without having the most basic documentation to prove who I was. I couldn't do anything for three months because I didn't have proper identification. So, that was really, that caused havoc like all by itself, you know, trying to get proper identification. I ran into so many roadblocks without it.

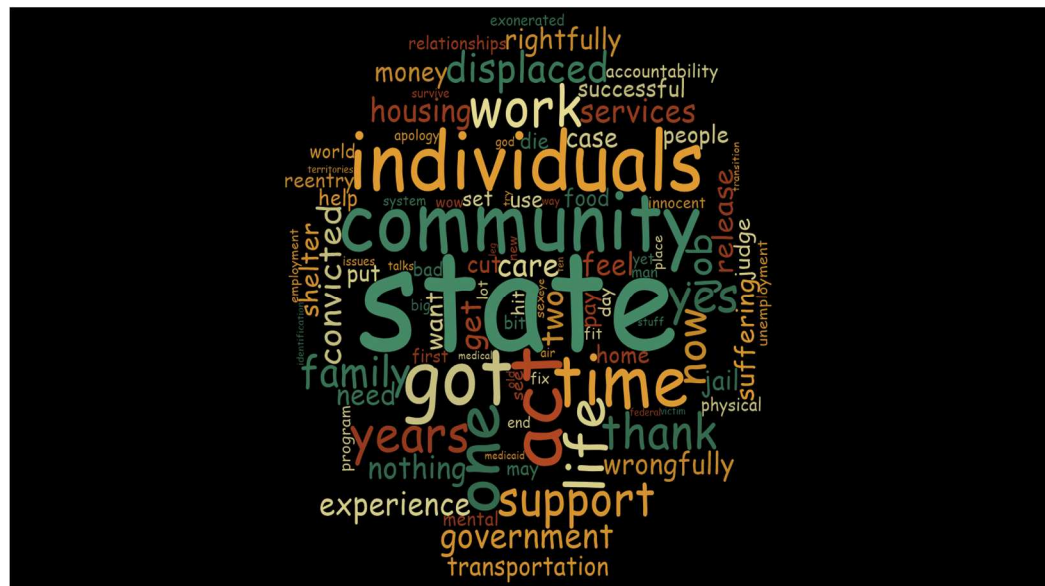
JD06282021 vented his experience,

I couldn't get no ID. They told me; oh, we need to get your original copy. They told me, if you're a naturalized citizen then the process of getting your original documents may take up to a year, especially during the COVID pandemic. Society needs to know, because... they let me know, they had me in that system, ready to die. They never thought I would ever come out of there. The system should never be set up like that. They should know individuals need identification when they get out. Every federal and state inmate

should have all the right documentations on file so, if a person's case gets reversed, the documents are already in there. The State release us without ID, the state doesn't accept us without ID. To be a member of society or supposed to be a productive member of society, at the very least, you need an ID.

**Figure 2**

*Highlights some themes that emerged from the data*



The visualization gives an overview of what the study's participants expressed during their interviews. The word cloud revealed some unexpected outcomes in the data that prompt further investigation. Because the participants had their terms and language to describe the same thing, this approach added color to the qualitative data showing critical differences. The data were carefully read to understand why specific words were used. These words were then grouped to show a significant theme. There were no discrepant cases in the study.

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

Through the qualitative approaches, I discovered new variables, relationships of participants' experiences, and the influences of their social contexts (Shufutinsky, 2020). As every researcher develops a different view regarding the data and the interpretation of results, I was mindful of the exploration. I understood the effect of my internal ideas, perceptions, values, prejudgments, and connections of the topic under study to my past (Butler, 2016; Creswell, 2013). The displayed bracketing enhanced the validity, objectivity, credibility, and trustworthiness of the study and allowed me to be self-aware and reflexive during the research process (Shufutinsky, 2020).

As the main instrument of the research, the participants' collected data were edited for thematic record, clarity, and germaneness. Still, they were told from the perspectives of the research participants, in their precise words, without interpretive commentary (Shufutinsky, 2020). To capture and to ensure the accurate reporting of participants as close to their personal experiences as possible, a member-checking approach was implemented for each interview. Each participant received a transcribed copy of their audio-recorded interview for confirmation and accuracy. Credibility was promoted when saturation occurred through the face-to-face interview of participants for this study until no new data emerged.

For external validity and variation in participants selection, transferability was vital. An explicit description of the research participants' experience was verbatim provided (Caelli et al., 2003; Cooper & Endacott, 2007) to establish transferability. The data included thick, rich, and detailed descriptions of the phenomena explaining presents,

transferable contexts, and participant experiences settings. The study demonstrated appropriate dependability strategies through the audit trail. I provided a transparent description of the research steps taken from the start of the research project to the development and the reporting of findings. This included the research design and data collection decisions and the steps taken to manage, analyze and report the data (Maher et al., 2018). Dependability was evident through the recordings and transcriptions of each participant's experiences. The participant's data was coded so that others could grasp the themes and attain similar assumptions. All collected data was consistent with the study's argument and answered the research questions (Ravitch and Carl, 2019). I presented a thick, rich description to answer the study's core constructs and concepts from the study. Lastly, achieving dependability was exhibited in the general qualitative design, as a solid research design highlights dependability in a research study (Ravitch and Carl, 2019).

The participants shaped the study's findings and not the researcher's bias, motivation, or interest (Lincoln et al., 1985). Confirmability was established through the transparent description of the study, from the start of the research project to the development and the reported findings (Lincoln et al., 1985; Malterud, 2001). I developed a reflexive journal, a diary for self-reflection and introspection of my beliefs and assumptions. I made regular entries during the research process.

In these entries, I recorded methodological decisions and their reasons, the logistics of the study. I reflected upon my values and interests (see Lincoln et al., 1985). I was also focused on myself and the research (see Mann, 2016). Here, I minimized my biases and acknowledged my predispositions while reducing the chances of preferences.

In being relatively neutral and unambiguous without bias, I reflected on how my biases and prejudices may affect the data interpretations. I took personal notes and documented my thoughts throughout the research process (see Lincoln et al., 1985).

## **Results**

Results from this study were organized by the research question and constructed from the literature. The results of this study answered the study's research questions. Ten interview questions were posed to participants to address the phenomenon of the lack of government reentry support services for exonerees. The two central research questions' objective was to explore the reentry service of individuals wrongfully convicted and exonerated. The ten research questions were designed based on the two research questions to gain insights from the experts of their own reentry experiences. The research questions that supported the objective were:

RQ1: What support or reentry services, if any, would have enhanced or increased the chances of a successful transition into society for individuals wrongfully convicted and exonerated?

RQ2: How did a lack of reentry services associated with life, employment, shelter, health, and connections with family and friends influence the transition back into society of individuals wrongfully convicted and exonerated?

Seven main themes materialized from the 8 participant's responses to the ten interview questions about the lack of government reentry support services for exonerees. Some of the themes that emerged from the face-to-face interview with participants included: shelter, employment, health, family and friends, government (the state), self-

efficacy and identification. Figure 4 show the ratings by the wrongfully convicted and exonerated participants.

### **Theme 1: Shelter**

The participants were asked to talk about their housing experience postincarceration. Family and or friends were significant helpers in this area. Results disclosed that six participants resided with some type of family member and/or friends upon reentry after exoneration. Only two participants resided in a hotel. Findings revealed that housing was immediately needed upon exoneration. However, findings showed that the state did not provide housing or it's representatives to the wrongfully convicted and exonerated. "Here I was doing interviews and at night, I am crying. When you don't have a place to lay your head, you cannot think, you cannot do anything." Living in a shelter, or a halfway house you are still at the mercy of the system because now, they put you in a room with a few other guys. If they clean up and find any contraband in the common area, all parties are guilty. How is that justice. "Everybody wanted to control my life and I'm saying I just want to be free."

### **Theme 2: Employment**

The participants were asked to talk about their employment experience if any, post-incarceration. At the time of the interview, six participants were unemployed. Two participant reported employment. Two of the six participants reported actively seeking employment. "I filled out everything, but they don't call you back." They asked about my credit and credit score. It's just frustrating you're filling out all these different forms, all these different things. Nobody calls. "I opened up my own company." Further findings

showed that participants desired entrepreneurship in advocacy and support to assist wrongfully convicted and exonerated individuals. “My supervisors felt like correctional officers, reminding me of that.”

### **Theme 3: Health**

The participants were asked to talk about their physical and /or mental health experience post-incarceration. Two of the participants reported pre-diabetic physical problems. “They told me I am prediabetic. I guess that came from the diet that they prescribe me in prison, so now, I got to go through all this stuff to keep my health in order.” Findings showed that all the participants received a wellness check upon exoneration. “I paid a certain amount of money, and they did a whole physical.” Seven participants indicated some type of mental health problem like PTSD. Only 1 participant did not report any mental health issues. “Mentally you are scarred by the justice system. You’re basically behind bars for half of your life. You basically believe you will die there. “What was experienced on the inside, the trauma and the PTSD was a journey walking through that and trying to walk through it unscathed, to hold on to your mental.” “Nonetheless, I have been victimized, I have wounds.” Findings revealed that upon exoneration participants are eligible to apply for the state’s medical benefits. “They tell you to get Medicaid, but you have to file.”

### **Theme 4: Family & Friends**

The participants were asked about what specific support was received from their family and friends. Five of the participants revealed that housing, food, money, clothing, transportation, support and whatever else needed were received from family. Further



findings revealed that six of the participants' first contact for the shelter came from their family or friends. Findings showed that six of the eight participants relied on family and or friends to meet their immediate needs. "I was blessed to have my family and I had friends that I still knew that was in my corner." So, my family came through for me, every which way." "That's the biggest support. I don't have to worry." "I had a friend that gave me one of his extra cars to use for a few weeks." Further findings also revealed challenges with family. 1 participant was left at the airport because the family member reported that "he didn't sign up for this."

### **Theme 5: The State**

The participants were asked about the support desired most from the government that was not received. Findings revealed the support desired most that was not received from the government as (a) services/programs - "the justice system took us away, but then it goes and put us back out into the world with nothing. So, it puts a burden on the families, you know?" "It's a double-edged sword." "I don't know how the state will possibly put together relationship networks, that will be good." You've been locked up in prison due to the state's actions, the last thing you want is to be made or even suggest doing something that the state wants you to do." "So, if the state can perhaps subcontract to organizations to remove the stigma name off it because nobody's rushing to be in a state anything after being in a state prison world, wrongfully." (b) Compensation - "What the government can do for me is give me money." "I believe the states should have emergency money that they can immediately issue for housing, food, clothing, underwear and socks. Many of us come out homeless and live off the blessings of someone else."

“The government should have a responsibility for that.” (c) Identification papers upon reentry and an apology. “Every time we file an appeal, the government name is on there. They’re opposing us. Even though it was an agency of the government that released us. We lost everything and couldn’t build a life because of the government’s case against us. “I was wrongfully convicted, and now I am out, and the state is throwing their hands in the air saying that we’re not responsible for you.” You’re out after how many years, count your blessings.”

### **Theme 6: Self-Efficacy**

Findings showed that all the participants needed help to manage their lives in society. All the participants reported being sleep deprived. Two of the participants shared checking and double-checking things prior to leaving their residence. Two of the participants revealed the struggle with having options. “Everything is so difficult to somebody that hasn’t done it all, so it takes some getting used to.” “They took my life from me wrongfully and they’re not taking the proper steps to rebuild it, in anyway.” “We are coming out of this situation, bottom of the chain.”

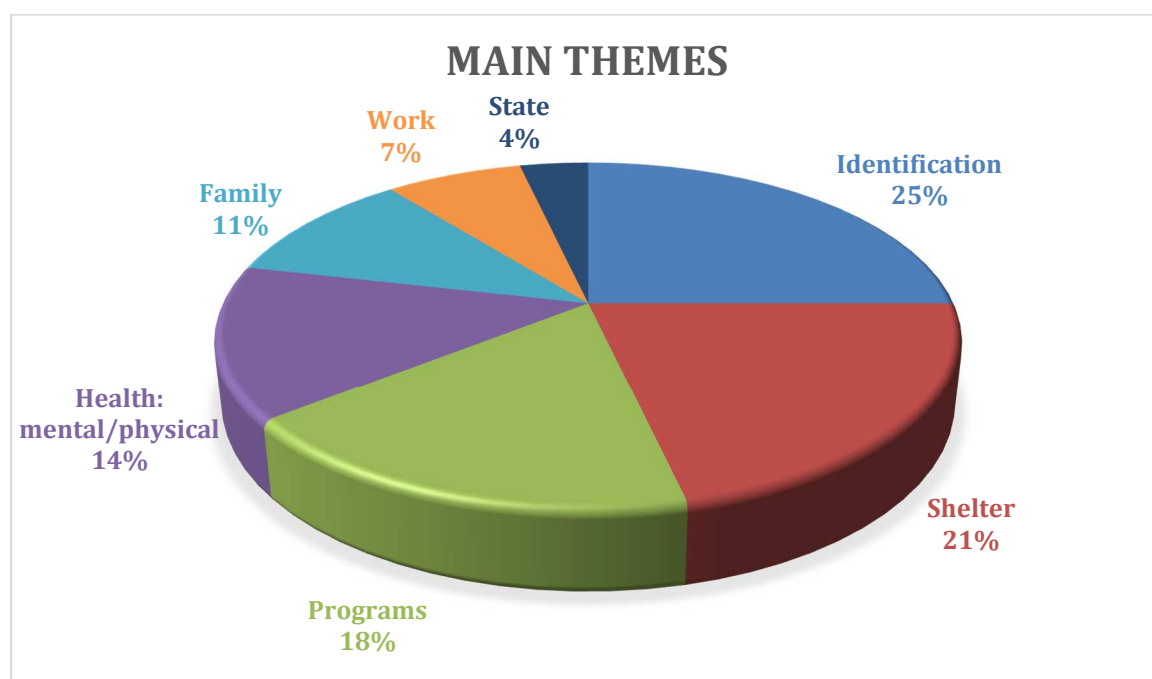
### **Theme 7: Identification**

Findings revealed that all the participants agreed on having access to proper identification information upon exoneration. “They should, if they know individuals need an I.D. when they get out, every state and federal inmate should have all the right documentation in their file.” “You’re being victimized because here you are again, trying to explain who you are to people who don’t care because you don’t have and can’t prove who you are.” Findings further revealed that, if a person is not a United States citizen, the

process and return time for an identification document, i.e., Naturalization paper is lengthier. Participant JD06282021 shared, “They told me that I had to wait 8 months to a year because of the Covid pandemic.”

**Figure 4**

*Ratings By The Wrongfully Convicted and Exonerated Participants*



### Summary of Findings

The general qualitative study’s purpose explored how the lack of reentry services for individuals wrongfully convicted and exonerated have influenced their transition back into society. The central research questions offered a better understanding of the phenomenon for this qualitative inquiry and guided this study. The study participants' demographics met the study’s criteria for participation in this study. Eight wrongfully convicted and exonerated individuals participated in the study. The participants were

adult males within the United States. The latter was exonerated two years or less from a federal/state prison. The participants were identified by their initials and interviewed date. Accordingly, the participants of the study are as follows: RF04282021, KH07272021, TL05242021, EA06192021, JD06282021, MC07112021, KN07142021, LS07302021. At the time of arrest, participants were 19 – 22 years old. Seven participants were United States citizens, and 1 participant was a Naturalized citizen of the United States of America. Participants were between 29 – 52 years old at the time of the interview. Participants' level of education included a GED program, completion of the 12<sup>th</sup> grade and some college. None of the participants held a college degree. The participants consisted of six African American/Black heritage and two Hispanic /Latino individuals.

At the interview, two participants were employed as the Chief Executive Officer of their advocacy company. Participants spent an average of 21 years in prison, varying from 9 years to 29 years, with a range of 5 months to 2 years exonerated. Six participants were exonerated less than one year, and two were exonerated between 1 and 2 years. No unusual circumstances were surrounding the study participation criteria. Seven themes emerged from the collective experiences and descriptions presented by the participants.

The themes identified were a person's life (self-efficacy), employment, shelter, health, family and friends, identification, and the state (government). The research questions were answered from the thick, rich, collective description of the participant's experiences.

RQ1: What support or reentry services, if any, would have enhanced or increased the chances of a successful transition into society for individuals wrongfully convicted and exonerated?

The 8 participants of the study responded to the research questions by providing the following answers. Identification of information support or reentry service according to the wrongfully convicted and exonerated needed to occur within the prison walls. The participants spoke of the importance of the government having identification information on file for each incarcerated person. Participants articulated the challenges of obtaining identification like birth certificates, social security cards, or driver's licenses. post-incarceration. The wrongfully convicted and exonerated participants shared that the support or reentry services, that would have enhanced or increased the chances of their successful transition into society were (a) shelter (b) healthcare/therapy (c) support services/programs (d) employment (e) money (f) food and clothing assistance and (g) identification documents

RQ2: How did a lack of reentry services associated with a person's life, employment, shelter, health, and connections with family and friends influence the transition back into society of individuals wrongfully convicted and exonerated?

A lack of reentry services associated with a person's life, employment, shelter, health, and connections with family and friends influenced the wrongfully convicted and exonerated transition back into society. The participant's collective data presents a detailed breakdown of the implementation of a lack of reentry services. Participants shared the post-incarceration effect of their wrongful conviction. The participants

expressed the experience of erratic sleep patterns due to their incarceration experience. The access to options now. Participants explained the difficulty in shopping for themselves. Participants revealed that their opinion and need was not considered in prison. The option to choices is difficult. Participants also shared problems with leaving their residence and the emotional and physical efforts of accumulating verifiable evidence on their whereabouts. To protect themselves from any wrongful accusation that may once again lead to a wrongful conviction, participants retain documents that may defend their whereabouts.

It is evident that a lack of accessible mental health is detrimentally needed in the treatment of PTSD and other mental issues that raised because of the government and its representative error. JD06282021 explains, "I am not going to lie to you and tell you, I am good. If I try to tell myself that, then I know that I am crazy. A soldier goes to war for a year, when he returns, he has access to different program to address his PTSD. I think that after 9, 20, 29 years with all those experiences, to say that I am good, I will be lying." Verbatim referencing participant MC07112021, "they told me they were going to pay for therapy, and they haven't. The number one thing, and I believe all exonerees need coming out." LS07302021 indicated that he takes it one day at a time. "Then every time I just think about it, I think about somebody else less fortunate than me. This is a reality, every time I think about torture, I think about pain. I think about our experience. Being in segregation not showering for over 5 months. When I think about that type of stuff, I just think about, ok, I got it."

All the participants experienced a wellness check-up upon reentry. Another indication on the importance of healthcare upon reentry. As participant RF04282021 stated, “I feel like they took my life from me wrongfully and they’re not taking the proper steps to rebuild it in anyway.” Participant LS07302021 shared, “they told me I’m pre-diabetic. I guess that came from the diet that they prescribe me in prison, so now I got to go through all this stuff to keep my health in order.”

A lack of support/services makes obtaining employment a challenge to the wrongfully convicted and exonerated. Here, the wrongfully convicted spent an average of 9 years incarcerated. The world has since changed. LS07302021 made a great metaphoric version of lost time when he expressed, “I don’t want nobody to offer me a job and give me ten dollars cash under the table. We know that when I’m 65. How am I going to use that to retire? Since I’ve been out of prison, I was displaced by the pandemic. I caught COVID. You know, they worked me like a slave for 17 some hours a day. I got out here and I applied for Social Security, I mean, unemployment. They told me I couldn’t get it, even though they worked me like a slave inside of prison. They told me they had exceptions to the rule. So, you know, they shoot me down and tell me that because I was in prison, I’m not entitled. And I’m saying, what do you mean? You worked me like a slave. You worked me as a slave. You worked me as a slave, under the 13th Amendment of the United States Constitution. You worked me under Article 9 of my state’s Constitution. You worked me as a slave. Then you tell me, I am not at least entitled to unemployment? After I bust my ass for you people. Like that isn’t fair. That is not fair. Not at all.”

The wrongfully convicted and exonerated are released to the unknown world of technology. According to participant JD06282021, “you got all of these things on the computer, on the internet, but they want us to do this, just coming out of the system.” EA06192021 explained, it is slow inside and fast in this world.”

Access to proper identification presented another challenge to employment and support services. JD06282021 clarified that not being a naturalized citizen of the United States intensified the process to obtaining his original documents. Participant illuminated the view to a non-citizen aspect. JD06282021 explained, “the process to obtain my original naturalization certificate cost me \$555 with a waiting period of 8 -12 months for the document.” KN07142021 eloquently described the challenge, “in my mind, you’re being victimized because here you are trying to explain who you are to people that really don’t care because you can’t prove who you are.” TL05242021 shared that he obtained employment through word of mouth. “I was able to work at a homeless shelter, but I didn’t have a chance. I didn’t have the opportunity to any training program to help me qualify for and look for a job.”

“There was nothing in place for individuals wrongfully convicted with help of housing.” TL05242021 shared nothing in place, no halfway house system, no reintegration, no building to help you. The lack of support/reentry housing services left the wrongfully convicted and exonerated participants to rely on family and friends or be displaced. TL05242021 stated, “I was fortunate enough to have a family to lend me a couch. You got to go wherever there’s room.” EA06192021 indicated that one of the



major issues might be that people don't have a place to live." MC07112021 believes that the number one thing for all exonerees coming out is therapy.

A lack of support/reentry health services influenced the wrongfully convicted and exonerated transition back into society. MC07112021 recognized the damages of a lack of support/reentry. "It took a lot of months to get healthcare, another big thing after being released." He continued, "We don't know how to do that, but when you were locked up so young, you really don't know how to navigate those things and there's nobody sitting around waiting to show us how to do it. MC07112021 further stated, "we need to be able to debrief. We just went through a traumatic experience, and we need to be able to debrief and just talk to somebody neutral." According to KH07272021, "mentally you are scarred by the justice system."

LS07302021, explained, "If you don't know what it feels like to be housed or held in shackles, chained with leg irons with them all buckled together at one time. And then, to be placed in somewhere, where it supposed to be six people, and it is thirteen of you all, and then you got to use the bathroom. Like, I just some of this stuff would be difficult to do." The trauma that's associated with the experience make it difficult to do some of these things out here, that they will want you to do. LS07302021 continues to explain. I see people trying to "gag" me. It's a "gag" move. Every time I turn around, somebody's trying to "gag" me something, I ain't got or what they think I'm going to have."

Not having connections with family and friends also influenced the transition of the wrongfully convicted and exonerated participants. JD06282021 understands this plight very well and emotionally shared his story of enduring challenges with family

members. “I stayed at my brother’s house, but it became challenging.” JD06282021, explained that his family member became frustrated because families are left to transport exonerees everywhere. “I didn’t sign up for this. I got to take you here. I got to take you over there.”

In the aftermath, JD06282021 was left at the airport where another family member transported him to their home. Connection with family and friends was substantial for the wrongfully convicted and exonerated participants in the study. “If it wasn’t for people, I would be ass out of luck. Somebody let me, somebody let me use a car so I can have transportation. People provide me, let me do odd jobs. They help me out so I can have gas money and be able to take care of myself,” shared LS07302021. Without the connection to family, the participants would have no one. RF04282021 explained how his family supported him. “My family stepped up and helped me. They came from gathering money for me, housing and everything and anything, I need. They are still here for me, doing everything.” MC07112021 summed up how the lack of connections with family and friends influenced their transition into society. “If it wasn’t for good people we know, some friends and some family, probably all of us will be in a bad situation.” An interpretation of the research findings of this study is presented in Chapter 5 and includes the research discussion, conclusions, recommendations, and the summary.

### **Summary**

It is suggestive for society to recognize that there are significant barriers to achieving success for those who are wrongfully convicted and exonerated. As such, the

key findings revealed the importance of building reentry services to support returning citizens and connecting those wrongfully convicted and exonerated to the needed resources. Housing was immediately needed upon exoneration. However, findings showed that the state did not provide housing or its representatives to the wrongfully convicted and exonerated. Findings also revealed that six of the eight participants relied on family and or friends to meet their immediate needs. Seven participants indicated some type of mental health problem like PTSD. Only one participant did not report any mental health issues. To ensure that exonerees, those who have wrongfully served time for crimes they did not commit, are able to attain stable housing, support services, mental healthcare, connection with family and friends, and contribute to their communities, barriers to successful reentry must be addressed.

Chapter 5 summarizes key findings and describes the ways the findings affect the knowledge in the discipline. As such, analysis, and interpretation of the context of the theoretical framework are included. Chapter 5 provides the recommendation for further research, implications for social change, and the limitations of this research study. Chapter 5 also includes a discussion on how the findings from the current study aligned or diverged from findings of prior research studies in the literature review.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

While exonerees are innocent upon reentry, their dilemmas, struggles, and challenges are far from over. Many exonerees are unable to find gainful employment or affordable housing and other basic human service needs. The purpose of this general qualitative study was to explore how the lack of reentry services for individuals wrongfully convicted and exonerated have influenced their transition back into society. A better understanding of the variables that highlighted the reentry experience and a lack of support services for individuals wrongfully convicted and exonerated is beneficial to develop effective strategies to fight this problem.

The current general qualitative study was designed to explore the lack of reentry services for those wrongfully convicted and exonerated and how that lack of services influenced their transition back into society in terms of a person's life, employment, shelter, health, and connections with family and friends (Harding et al., 2019). The findings from the face-to-face interview and transcription of the themes revealed that exonerees are like incarcerated individuals needing, as Maslow (1943) indicated, the essentials of food, clothing and health, employment, relationship, esteem, and self-actualization.

The state crime literature examining the harms experienced by those wrongfully convicted and exonerated is scarce. Most research are case studies that examine the legal aspects of exoneration, call for reform, and are limited to offering only a theoretical understanding of the reentry services of individuals wrongfully convicted and exonerated. Leo (2005 p. 215) urged social scientists to draw on existing social science frameworks

to identify the various levels of analysis on which comprehensive theory might be built. Kauzlarich et al. (2001) disapproved of the absence of theoretical development in the study of state crime.

In response to Leo's (2005) criticism, I used Kauzlarich et al.'s (2001) analysis of state crime victims to categorize how the state was accountable for the harms exonerees suffer after release. As Kauzlarich et al. (2001) maintained, developing victimology of state crime necessitates a complete detail of the victims. This general qualitative study portrayed an assessment of the "state harm" rather than the "state crime" by recording the actual harms experienced by victims based on findings and Kauzlarich et al.'s six propositions that depicted experiences of state crime victims. When applied to the wrongfully convicted and exonerated participants, these commonalities exposed the state as creating the harms exonerees struggle to overcome upon reentry. The commonalities further revealed the extent to which the lack of human reentry services impacts exonerees.

### **Interpretation of the Findings**

The sample population consisted of eight adult male exonerees from the United States. Face-to-face interviews were conducted via Zoom with participants chosen from a list maintained by the National Registry of Exonerations (2020). The participants consisted of six African American/Black heritage and two Hispanic /Latino individuals. Participants spent an average of 21 years in prison, varying from 9 years to 29 years, with a range of 5 months to 2 years exonerated. The analytic approach taken in the study resulted in categories of codes developed during the analysis.

The methodological integrity of the study was established through the feedback from participants on their transcripts and the reflexivity of my journaling and bracketing. The current literature presented a gap that suggested that the wrongfully convicted and exonerated are left lacking the resources or help needed to transition back into society or recover from the trauma of being wrongfully convicted and exonerated (Kukucka et al., 2020). With this research I sought to answer the two research questions on whether support or reentry services, if any, would have enhanced or increased the chances of a successful transition into society for individuals wrongfully convicted and exonerated and whether a lack of reentry services associated with life, employment, shelter, health, and the connections with family and friends influenced transition back into society.

The significance in advancing the disciplinary understandings of the study was built on the findings and the application of past knowledge to the new situations and phenomena to improve and extend the field of study. The emerging themes showed the critical need for human support services upon reentry into society for the wrongfully convicted and exonerated. The participants shared thick, detailed, and descriptive information about their need for a successful transition into society. “They let you out and think they did you a big favor,” said EA06192021. Most of the participants indicated, “I was literally stolen and uprooted from my life and thrown in prison, and then I was literally kicked out because it was on a day notice,” as TL05242021 expressed it.

Despite extensive research summarizing the causes of wrongful convictions, there is no literature summary on how the lack of reentry human services impacts exonerees. Given the growth of exonerees, it was important to assess the challenges that influenced

their successful reintegration into society. Below is a synopsis of the findings as they confirm, relate, and extend past knowledge.

### **Shelter**

Before formerly incarcerated people can address health problems, look for work, and be educated on new skills, they need housing. Shelter was the main concern and challenge for the participants upon reentry. Participants spoke on the suddenness of their exoneration and opposed being thrown out into an unknown world, even though the participants challenged and contested the sentence awarded to them. Most were joyously surprised by the abrupt release from prison. Findings revealed housing as the most important necessity upon release, confirming previous literature. When wrongfully convicted individuals are released from prison, stable housing is imperative to their successful reintegration. Housing increases the possibility that formerly incarcerated individuals can rebuild as law-abiding citizens (Furst & Evans, 2017). Walking out of prison, exonerees must have shelter, food, clothing, and medical care, just like all people. Exonerees are no different in that aspect of postrelease life than any other releasee. Criminological research has emphasized that formerly incarcerated people are most likely to be homeless in the period shortly after their release (Remster, 2019). The data supports this finding as many states do not have the programs or services available to help exonerees integrate back into society.

Exonerees are released deprived of the resources of housing and encounter obstacles when securing housing (Li, 2018). This finding confirms the theoretical state harm framework of Kauzlarich et al. (2001) who stated that victims are often blamed for

their suffering. The phrase “they must have been guilty” is commonly heard from family, friends, and community members accusing them of their dilemma. Participants without family and or friends are left displaced.

Most exonerees seek refuge with family and friends, on a couch or where and whatever is available to them. Many reenters society without family and friends due to a loss. The wrongfully convicted and exonerated then are left to figure, fend, and thrive lacking help. Homeless, the exoneree must now survive in an unfamiliar world.

In 1943, Maslow documented his hierarchy of needs. From the bottom of the hierarchy upwards, the first need was physiological. For Maslow (1943), this meant food, water, warmth, and rest, followed by security and safety. Maslow (1943) recognized that these needs were essential to an individual’s progress. Every person is capable and has the desire to move up the hierarchy toward a level of fulfillment. Unfortunately, growth is often disrupted by a failure to meet lower-level needs. Exonerees’ experiences reflect the dual traumas of wrongful conviction and release without a foundation on which to rebuild their lives. All the participants placed housing as their greatest need upon reentry.

### **Employment**

Employment was an important aspect in the lives of newly released wrongfully convicted and exonerated individuals. It takes a while for compensation to come in for the exoneree. Finding employment would assist the exoneree in maintaining his life. However, employment challenges were exacerbated by the lack of transportation and knowledge of and experience with technology. Exonerees faced another barrier of having little or no employment history (McGrew & Hanks, 2017).



Harding et al. (2019) highlighted how employment opportunities postincarceration remain limited, low waged, without benefits, and with little prospect for future growth. Despite having little or no previous employment, exonerees are expected to reform themselves as respectable law-abiding and employed citizens upon reentry. Exonerees face the barrier of a wrongful conviction on their criminal record. Expungement would be an understandable remedy for wrongfully convicted individuals. Shlosberg et al. (2012) confirmed that almost one-third of exonerees did not have their records removed. As expungement was not immediate, exonerees experienced had to explain their criminal history or be eliminated from the applied position. Shlosberg et al. (2012) examined the factors that impacted exonerees' postrelease criminality. Their study found that the absence of expungement caused postexoneration offending. My findings related to the theoretical framework of Kauzlarich et al. (2001). The findings confirmed that state crime victims relied on the victimizer, an associated institution, or civil social movements for reparation. The process to employment was arduous for the exonerees, leading most to entrepreneurship upon compensation from the State. However, exonerees were confronted by radically new technology, the lack of transportation, and the need to explain their wrongful conviction due to the state's error. Although cases were dismissed, vacated, and pardoned, criminal records remained a traumatic stigma of a crime that did not happen.

## **Health**

Medicaid is not automatically given upon exoneration (Innocence Project, 2020). Findings revealed that in certain states participants were released with their Medicaid

card in their folder, while others were instructed to apply for Medicaid benefits. Mental health was a challenge upon reentry for the wrongfully convicted and exonerated. Zannella et al. (2020) confirmed the study's findings as individuals who experience stigma experience an increased risk to their health, such as depression, low self-esteem, and low self-worth. Although I conducted interviews individually, participants collectively shared the psychological effect of their wrongful conviction and the state's treatment before and after exoneration. Alexander-Bloch et al. (2020) provided evidence supporting the need for postincarceration mental health services for exonerated prisoners. The analysis was based on the mental health and sleep problems of exonerees across the United States. This study's findings related to the current research, as the eight participants revealed having problems with sleep postincarceration. The findings of this study also related to Heilbrun et al. (2020) in that the exonerees' releases were not planned, and most were subjected to the media's attention. The shame of their charge compounded the challenges to reentering the community. This study supports that the miscarriage of justice experienced relates to the trauma experienced by military veterans, immigrants, survivors of calamity, and prisoners of war (Brooks & Greenberg, 2021).

Physical health was not disclosed as a critical issue. Participants, however, indicated receipt of wellness checkup promptly upon post exoneration. Wildeman and Wang (2017) explained that the stressful experience influences disease trajectories for incarceration history. Two of the eight participants reported pre-diabetic illness because of their prison diet. Deshay (2016), recognized that the formerly incarcerated might be

released with contagious diseases, illness, and physical injuries resulting from the prison environment, leading to negative mental and physical health outcomes.

Like, Wallace & Wang (2020), the study's findings supported that poor health made individuals with chronic illness feel that the quality of their daily life was too challenging. The study relates to the literature that exonerees lacked medical insurance and struggled to pay health premiums and could have pre-existing conditions that put premiums out of range (Westervelt & Cook, 2010). Subsequently, immediate access to health care remained impossible. This finding relates to Kauzlarich et al. (2001) theoretical framework of re-victimization from the State. The exonerees became easy targets to victimization, as they continued to need assistance and resources from the State. I was surprised that some exonerees had access to health benefits upon reentry and could exit prison with their benefit card in their folder. This was a significant theme and finding for the study. I would not do anything differently.

### **Family and Friends**

The findings showed the significance of Family and friends in the reentry experience of the wrongfully convicted and exonerated. Family and friends were the constant support available for exonerees in immediate need of shelter. Many shared about incarcerated friends who were homeless because they had no one to come home to, which led them back into the criminal justice system. This finding relates to the literature (Mowen et al., 2019) that family support is vital for reentry success. Family support relates to reentry success because families provide for the basic needs of returning individuals. However, existing research finds that high family support levels do not

remove victimization during reentry (Mowen et al., 2019). Findings also revealed that some family members do not support the exoneree upon reentry. Lengthy convictions and pasts incarceration hinders and weakens family ties placing post incarcerated individuals into the routines and interactions of prison life (Western et al., 2015). I was surprised by the numerous pressure and responsibilities placed on family and friends. I would not do anything different regarding the finding or theme.

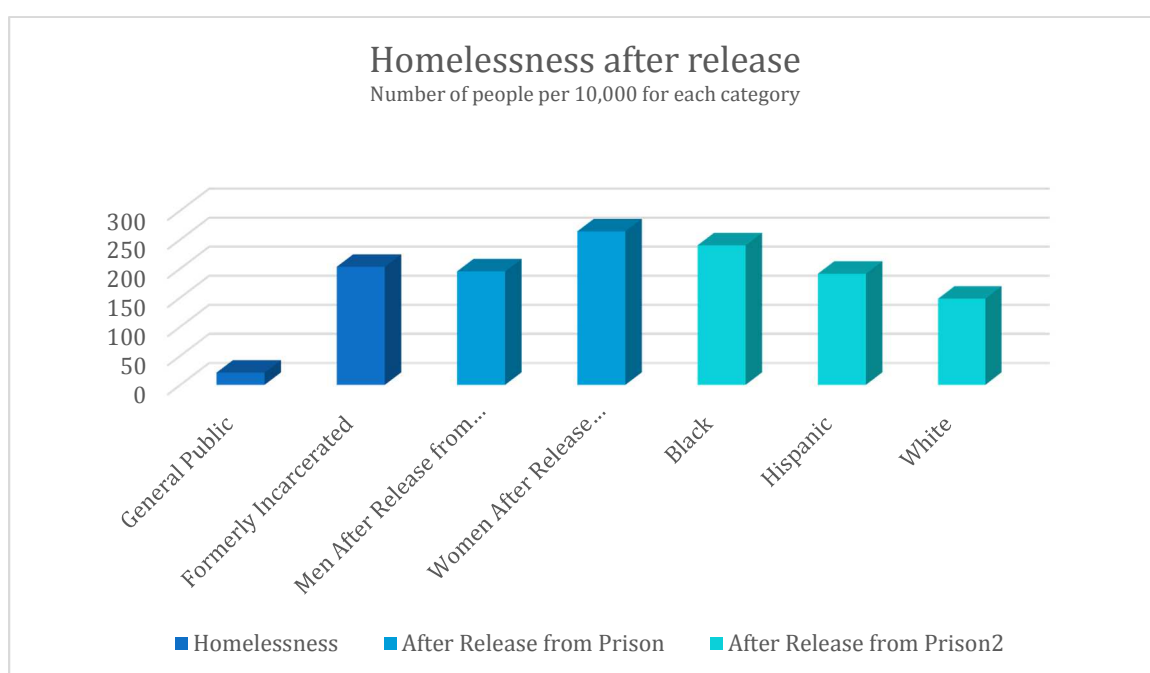
### **Government**

Lastly, the findings confirmed and aligned to the theoretical framework literature indicated in chapter 2. Kauzlarich et al. (2001) shared six commonalities that are common amongst victims of state harm. The experience of wrongfully convicted and exonerated participants replicated the six commonalities of state victims found in Kauzlarich et al. (2001), *Toward a Victimology of State Crime*. The past knowledge confirmed that the wrongfully convicted and exonerated are victims of state crime/harm. The findings showed that upon reentry, some of the wrongfully convicted and exonerated participants were released with only Medicaid and Food-Stamps benefits and are eligible to Medicaid and food-stamps government benefits. The findings also showed that housing and support or reentry services would have enhanced or increased the chances of a successful transition into society for individuals wrongfully convicted and exonerated upon reentry. A lack of reentry services associated with one's life, employment, shelter, health, and connections with family and friends influenced transition back into society, creating a cycle for homelessness and re-incarceration. All the participants placed housing as their greatest need upon reentry. Participants without shelter are not eligible

for transition and government housing upon exoneration. Participants without family and or friends are left displaced. Formerly incarcerated people have very high rates of homelessness, especially Black and Brown individuals. There are racial disparities in homelessness after release, as shown in the figure below.

**Figure 3**

*Homelessness After Release*



Note. Data from L. Couloute, “Nowhere to Go: Homelessness Among Formerly Incarcerated People,” Prison Policy Initiative.

[www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/housing.html](http://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/housing.html)

The wrongfully convicted and exonerated are subjected to negative psychological effects upon their release. They also experience social factors, such as family and social networks, personal factors, self-efficacy, mental-physical health, institutional factors,

including barriers to employment and housing and government benefits (Zannelle et al., 2020; Westervelt and Cook, 2018; Liem and Garcin, 2014). I was shocked by the findings and theme in this section. I was surprised by the unaccountability of the state in diminishing its crimes to an individual level. The finding relates to the commonalities of the theoretical framework that the harms caused by the state are due to the actions of individuals or groups who pursue the larger goals of their respective organizations. For the state to not stand responsible, is to disregard its own social, political, and historical perspectives which structure the very essence of state agencies Kauzlarich et al. (2001). I would not do anything different regarding the findings or theme.

### **Additional Findings**

#### **Consensus**

In exploring the reentry of individuals wrongfully convicted and exonerated, participants shared the challenge of not having an identification card upon exoneration. Findings detailed those participants who were released to their community without identification faced barriers. Identification was warranted to obtain housing, employment, health care, food-stamp, and other government benefits. Participants were required to produce identification documents in its original form as copies were not recognized.

Race was another finding of the study. The United States Census Bureau statistics showed that whites make up 76.3 percent of the population, with 13.4 percent black (census.gov, 2019). In 2019, there were 1,096 sentenced black prisoners and 214 sentenced white prisoners for every 100,000 residents per ethnic group in the United States (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2019). Exonerations of white prisoners account for 36

percent (1,017) of the total, while exonerations of black prisoners account for 49 percent (1,405) of the total (National Registry of Exonerations, 2021). The numbers indicate a racial preference, which is confirmed by the participants' ethnic background of the study.

I was surprised that all the participants in the study desired to be acknowledged. As one participant stated, “my story, my name.” The participants expressed the need to not be masked nor hidden. Theoretically, the U.S. criminal justice system carries out court hearings in the name of the people, not the specific victim. The “state” is the victim. What happens, however, when “the people” are victimized by the state? What is available to the now victim?

The research methods were an integral part of the study’s design. To answer the research questions, I considered how I wanted to collect the data and how I planned to analyze the data. A qualitative approach was best suited to retrieve the thick, detailed, and descriptive information of the experience of the wrongfully convicted and exonerated. To understand the themes and how they were communicated, a thematic analysis was decided. I familiarized myself with the data, assigned codes and described the content. From the different interviews, I searched for patterns or themes. I reviewed the transcript information. Then I named and produced a comprehensive and explanatory report. Although, I used a deductive approach and analyzed the themes, I was flexible and received other themes that emerged from the findings. I am comfortable in all the methods used within the study in data collection, analysis, or related to the findings.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The limitation to trustworthiness that arose from the execution of the study involved the exclusion of female participants. The study is limited in that the findings are only constructed from the perspective of adult males who were wrongfully convicted and exonerated and lacks the understanding of adult females who were wrongfully convicted and exonerated. Typically, with qualitative data, generalization of the interview findings is not possible because of the subjective nature of the experiences and because of the little participation.

The limitation of this general qualitative study is that it could not be broadly generalized. The purposive sampling procedure decreased the generalizability of findings. This study was not generalizable to all wrongful convictions and exonerated individuals. However, once transcripts were transcribed and coded, similar themes occurred within and across the data in response to the interview questions. The eight participants were enough to conclude data saturation. Data saturation was achieved with four participants; however, further analysis was conducted to seek maximum variation in the experience of a phenomenon. Another limitation of unknown conditions or factors in the participant's community may have influenced responses. Lastly, in recruitment of newly released candidates, I was faced with two challenges. (a) Candidates in the process with civil lawsuit failed to participate in hopes to protect their legal case. (b) Recruitment of the wrongfully convicted and exonerated participants were a challenge, without the use of snowballing. Participants were more agreeable to partake in the study when recommended.



### **Recommendations**

The researcher's recommendation for further research was grounded in the strengths and limitations of the current study as well as the reviewed literature identified in chapter 2. As relatively little research has been done on the lack of reentry services for the wrongfully convicted and exonerated, greater replication and extension of this research is warranted. Westervelt and Cook (2010), analysis started a foundation for further theoretical inquiry into the wrongful conviction of the innocent as a form of state crime. Based on the research findings, attention should be directed towards the family of those wrongfully convicted and exonerated. Most of the reentry support came from family. Future research should extend Grounds (2005) study on treatment for family members resulting from the impact of the wrongful conviction and exoneration. The array of support reported by exonerees from family members illuminates this perspective. The exploration of the research emerged as a theme for identity documents upon exoneration. Further focus should be on the importance of reentry with identification papers and its effect on support services and the successful transition of the wrongfully convicted and exonerated. By shifting the discussion away from the reentry services of individuals wrongfully convicted and exonerated, this general qualitative study encourages an investigation into the political affiliation of states and the number of wrongful convictions and exonerations.

### **Implications**

Social change affects the individual, family, organization, and society/policy. Any aspect of change creates fear. The study explored some of the human services challenges

the wrongfully convicted and exonerated face upon reentry. The participants, experts to their experience shared their personal experience. The impact based on the findings of the research for positive social change that are consistent with and bounded by the scope of the study illustrated the effect a lack of reentry services has on the successful transition and would aid criminal justice administrators, politicians, and state governments to consider policies that included services to support reentry directed to one's life, employment, shelter, health and connections with family and friends.

The state's role was examined through the theoretical approach in contributing to the lack of service for the wrongfully convicted and exonerated. The theoretical implications were confirmed with the study's findings. The study's findings agree with the state harm/crime theory on which the research was based. I used the state crime framework to analyze and identify the state's contribution to the wrongfully convicted and exonerated social problems after release. The state crime framework provided insights through Kauzlarich et al. (2001) six commonalities and addressed the study's research questions. Key terms of the six commonalities provided a synopsis of the state's role in the participants' wrongful conviction and exoneration.

The research suggested that all six commonalities of Kauzlarich et al. (2001) state harm theory are experienced by the participants. Verbatim words/phrases acquired through the face-to-face interview with participants provided a pictorial view of their position as victims of state harm. None of the quotes were measured to a particular participant or commonality and may be appropriate to more than one category.

**Class of the Individual**

Here, the class of the individual was determined by the environment/community the participants resided. All the participants grew up within an economic group with the least wealth and power in society. As one participant explained, "I dropped out of school and start working two jobs to help my mom keep the lights on."

**Accountable for Their Illegal Behavior**

Participants experienced rejection and additional incarceration time during parole hearings as further punishment for not confessing to their convicted crime.

**Blamed for Their Suffering**

As a result of participant's failure to admit to their conviction, participants served more incarcerated time instead of being released within their community on parole. Thus, the participant was viewed to have prolonged their conviction. "Guys were given extra five years, if they don't admit to the crime, that was the contingency of coming home. That was the contingency. "A part of you have to admit to the problem or you get five years, and you go back (to your cell) and think about it for the next five years."

**Rely on the Victimizer**

Participant's freedom hung on the same justice system that created the error in conviction to govern their exoneration. "Guys were given extra five years, if they don't admit to the crime, that was the contingency of coming home. That was the contingency. "A part of you have to admit to the problem or you get five years, and you go back (to your cell) and think about it for the next five years." Relying on the victimizer continues

upon reentry for the wrongfully convicted and exonerated. “As far as receiving assistance, nothing was ever given to me.”

### **Easy Targets for Repeated Victimization**

It should be noted that a participant's release happened suddenly, without warning. “We are snatched out of society, when they arrest us!” Then, “we are released without resources!” What happens to us if we have no one? No family, or friends to return to...to be there for us. “I can't depend on the state because the state not doing nothing for me.”

### **Illegal State Policies and Practices to Achieve Organizational, Bureaucratic, or Institutional Goals**

“A bird in the hand is better than two in the bush.” You know, that was, you know, my mentality. I didn't want to continue to grow old in there. I didn't want to continue, cause that's what it was, just it was taken from me. It was draining me. It was draining me so.” There is a problem systematically if the wrongly convicted is willing to admit guilt falsely, to be released on parole to qualify for government assistance to escape a life of growing old behind bars. “I'm not dependent on them because they haven't come through yet.”

After exploring the study, the contributions to advanced practice and or policy are to extend knowledge and generate positive social change in the discipline by forming awareness to policymakers and others in the criminal justice system to address the need for policies related to support services and state aid for exonerees. Scholarship of the

discipline can benefit from the study to advance practice to address the need for policies to support services and state aid for exonerees.

### **Conclusion**

The findings suggested that support or reentry services for the wrongfully convicted and exonerated would have enhanced or increased the chances of a successful transition into society for individuals wrongfully convicted and exonerated. Participants shared thick, rich, detailed experience of their challenges, barriers, and triumphs. The findings further disclosed that a lack of reentry services, associated with one's life, employment, shelter, health, and connections with family and friends influenced the wrongfully convicted and exonerated transition back into society. Thus, to classify innocents as victims of state harms puts a human face on the need for changes in state accountability and policy to address the human service needs and challenges faced by individuals wrongfully convicted and exonerated. "What sentence is an appropriate sentence to give an innocent man?" This question was posed during an exoneration case by an Honorable Judge. The Federal Sentencing Guidelines Act in 1984, eliminated parole for federal prisoners, limited early release from prison for good behavior, and reduced the discretion of federal district court judges. Neither federal nor state judges can deviate from sentencing guidelines except in aggravating or mitigating circumstances not covered in the guidelines. Judges deviating from the guidelines, must justify their reasons in writing.

It is applicable that violent offenders be removed from our community, but the indiscreet use of prison to lock up so many wrongfully convicted and exonerated persons

undermined family structure by removing males from racial minority communities.

“What sentence is an appropriate sentence to give an innocent man?” In *Monroe v. Pape* (1961), the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that citizen could bring Section 1983 suits against state officials in federal courts without first exhausting all state judicial remedies. In another case, *Robinson v. California* (1962), the Court extended the Eighth Amendment's prohibition against cruel and unusual punishment to the states.

The exploration of Reentry Services of Individuals Wrongfully Convicted and Exonerated disclosed the challenges brought about by the transition of being wrongfully convicted and exonerated. The represented themes housing, family, the state (government), services and mental health emerged. Despite these interpretations, the wrongfully convicted and exonerated lack of the resources or help needed to transition back into society or recover from the trauma added to the wrongful conviction itself. Participant explained, “I don't like to come off like a victim, nonetheless, I have been victimized. And after spending 38 years or 35 years or 20 years or 15 years, or how many years, I spent those as innocent years.”

As a result of the interview, this statement clarified an understanding and answered the judge's question. “Being that I was a juvenile and wrongfully convicted, they sentenced me to an automatic mandatory life without the possibility of parole.” “So, I was to spend my natural life in jail, you know, for this murder with no possibility whatsoever for me to have my freedom, unless the courts, again, you know, looked at my case and determined that an error did occur.” “I don't know from where, I am getting my apology, so that was thrown out the window.”

The United States dominate most countries in its influence over the course of state crime (Kauzlarich et al., 2001). The United States also holds the highest record of incarcerated people. Compared to other parts of the world, every U.S. State profoundly default to the prisons and jails systems as a reaction to crime (Statista.com). Home to the largest number of prisoners, as of May 2021, the United States had the highest prisoner rate, with 639 prisoners per 100,000 of the national population (Statista.com). Policy makers need to acknowledge that past, present, and future policies supportive of existing discrimination and operational inequality hurt minority groups.

The exploration of reentry for individuals wrongfully convicted and exonerated enlightened some of the challenges and barriers faced by the exonerated population upon reentry. The experience of the wrongfully convicted and exonerated was spoken by experts to their experience. The government have much to do to fulfill the vision of the fathers of the Constitution. While the introduction may have little significance in a court of law, the preface to the Constitution remains an important part of the nation's constitutional dialogue, inspiring and fostering broader understandings of the American system of government (Findlaw.com, n.d.). When the government and their representatives fail to promote the general welfare of the nation described as the blessings of liberty: “We the people of the United States of America, are protected in our freedom of speech, the media, gathering together, freedom from cruel and unusual punishments, and the right to petition the government for a compensation of our grievances, injustices, and complaints.”

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## Appendix A: Demographics

- 1) Please print your initials.
- 2) What was your age at time of arrest? \_\_\_\_\_ years old.
- 3) What is your current age/category?  
☐ 18-25  
☐ 26-35  
☐ 36-45  
☐ 46-55  
☐ 56-64  
☐ 65 & older
- 4) What is your highest completed grade/level of education?  
☐ 8<sup>th</sup> – below grade  
☐ 9<sup>th</sup>  
☐ 10<sup>th</sup>  
☐ 11<sup>th</sup>  
☐ 12<sup>th</sup>
- 5) Which of these categories describes your race?  
☐ African American/Black  
☐ White  
☐ American Indian or Alaska Native  
☐ Asian  
☐ Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander  
☐ Hispanic or Latino
- 6) Are you currently employed?  
☐ Yes  
☐ No
- 7) Is it full-time, part-time, or occasional work?
- 8) Are you looking for work?
- 9) How many years were you incarcerated \_\_\_\_\_ years?
- 10) How Long Have You Been Out of Prison? \_\_\_\_\_ Years? What was your release date? \_\_\_\_\_ mm/dd/yr.

## Appendix B: Interview Protocol

1. Tell me about becoming eligible for release?
  - How did you find out?
2. What support services were you told will be available to you upon reentry?
3. What support or reentry services would have enhanced or increased your chances of a successful transition into society?
4. Tell me about the services you had for finding healthcare?
5. Tell me about your employment experience post incarceration, if any?
6. Tell me about your housing experience post incarceration?
7. Tell me about your physical and mental health post incarceration?
8. What specific support service would you have liked to receive?
9. What specific support did you receive from family and friends?
10. What support do you desire most from the government that you didn't get?
  - Have you thought about what your future looks like?